



“The Oregon white truffle has an inimitable essence that sends lovers rushing to bedrooms and dreamers losing themselves in reverie.”

# TREASURE HUNTER

JACK CZARNECKI CREATES AMERICA'S FIRST  
NATURAL TRUFFLE OIL BY EMILY GROSVENOR

**I**n a secluded private forest about 30 miles southwest of Portland, Jack Czarnecki ties a carved-out milk jug to his waist and trudges to a fern-blanketed patch under a single Douglas fir.

Then he digs—moving the rich, black dirt from around the roots of the tree with a fine-toothed rake.

And he digs.

And he digs.



What he's looking for is creamy white. It could be tiny—about the size of a kernel of corn—or as large as a child's fist. If his eyes aren't attuned to the meager light filtering through the canopy, he just might rake a baseball-sized Oregon spring white truffle past his foot and not even notice.

"That's when I really get mad—when I'm standing right on top of them," Czarnecki says.

If Oregon's truffles are one of the country's best-kept food secrets, then Jack Czarnecki is the culinary genius who has done the most in the Pacific Northwest to bring them into the light—one sweep of the rake at a time. For years, Czarnecki wowed with truffle dishes at his Dayton, Oregon restaurant, the Joel Palmer House. Now, he has created the first-ever American truffle oil, which he is quietly selling to vineyards, chefs, foodies, a handful of specialty stores, and from the Joel Palmer House website.

**"The Oregon spring white truffle smells like a heady cocktail of herbs, garlic and earth."**

Less powerful than their European brethren, but packed with aroma-enhancing properties famous to the species, the spring white variety smells like a heady cocktail of herbs, garlic and earth. But it also has that inimitable truffle essence that sends lovers rushing to bedrooms and dreamers losing themselves in reverie.

In other words, truffles, when used properly, make dishes taste like they were walked through the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles before arriving on the table.

"White truffles have a sensual characteristic to them," Czarnecki says.

Capturing that feeling and that taste just got a little easier for the rest of us. Two years ago, Czarnecki passed the oven mitts at his acclaimed restaurant to his son, Chris Czarnecki, so he could devote himself to a simple retirement project. His goal was to harness that truffle essence—a natural mixture of 30 volatile organic compounds—in an oil that can be shipped anywhere in the world.

"This is the culmination of my life," Czarnecki says. "This is the project I was born for."

Mushrooms run in Czarnecki's blood. He grew up in eastern Pennsylvania, the son of a mushroom photographer who often dragged him into the woods on forays. Later, he worked for a mushroom distributor before following his dream and moving with his wife to Oregon—a kind of Shangri-La for mushroom hunters.

Czarnecki hunts truffles the hard way—no pigs, no dogs, no glory. He heads to the woods three times a week to dig them out, painstakingly, one by one.

This day—a true Oregon day, with rain, sleet, snow and sunshine all showing up to the party—is a red-letter day for white truffles. Today, Czarnecki hopes to get a feel for what the forest is producing, so he can plan the rest of the season.

“This is going to be the greatest truffle hunt there ever was,” Czarnecki says, while pulling tools out of his muddy Subaru. “It will also be your last.”

Czarnecki is kidding, but only slightly. Oregon spring white truffles are high-demand luxury products that can fetch more than \$10 per ounce at local markets. Mushroom hunters of all stripe are territorial, and truffle gatherers especially so.

He pulls his cap down and strides into the woods. Within minutes, Czarnecki unearths what mushroom hunters call a patch—an almost magical accumulation of truffles under a single tree.

This particular truffle is what Czarnecki calls a “five-minute truffle.” The adrenaline rush that accompanies any truffle find will give him enough energy to keep his quick but measured pace for another five minutes.

“It’s like a drug,” Czarnecki said. “Every one of the truffles you see pop out of dark sweet earth, it generates a dopamine response.”

Within seconds, Czarnecki finds a “one-hour truffle”—about the size of a large kiwi fruit. It is gorgeous, hard and bulbous, and in the perfect stage for ripening. It is the kind of truffle that makes Czarnecki lean back, stab his rake into the ground, and sigh. He drops it into his milk jug with a dampened clink.



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At the Joel Palmer House restaurant, Chris Czarnecki has taken over in the kitchen. His father, Jack, now prefers the dining room, where he uses truffle oil as freely as some might use pancake syrup.



### A Real Product

Over the past seven years, Czarnecki has assembled a network of close friends and private owners who have afforded him exclusive rights to hunt on their properties, most of them situated in the bucolic Red Hills of Willamette Valley's wine country. From these woods, he unearths enough truffles to satisfy the throngs of people heading to the Joel Palmer House for the restaurant's famed "Mushroom Madness Menu" and to handcraft cases of his Oregon White Truffle Oil.

Czarnecki is the first American truffle purveyor to have discovered a way to produce a natural truffle oil that can be counted on to be safe to eat. The Department of Microbiology at Oregon State University receives about three license applications for truffle oil products every year. Because of the danger of botulism in products like truffle oil, Mark Daeschel, a professor in OSU's Food Science and Technology department, has never approved a single one—until now.

**"Jack Czarnecki is the culinary genius who has done the most to bring Oregon truffles into the light—one sweep of the rake at a time."**

"Jack has a really novel and different approach," Daeschel says. "It's not really rocket science, but I imagine he based the approach on observations of how other foods might behave."

Czarnecki's innovation comes on the heels of a years-long international truffle oil backlash that gained wind when it

was revealed that many European truffle oil producers had begun hawking synthetic truffle oils made from chemical truffle essence.

Today, the bulk of the world's commercial truffle oils are created by combining olive oil with

one or more compounds, including 2,4-dithiapentane—the most prominent of the hundreds of aromatic molecules that make the flavor of white truffles so exciting. It is a lab-created taste.

"In general, truffle oils have a rotten reputation," Czarnecki says. "Some come on way too strong."

The relative cheapness of artificial truffle oils does account for the greater presence of truffle on menus around the country.

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Find Chris Czarnecki's recipe for Angel Hair Pasta with Dungeness Crab at [www.edibleportland.com](http://www.edibleportland.com).

Chefs frequently use it to ramp their dishes up a notch, but diners in the know have turned against the flavor enhancer.

Like any good businessman, Czarnecki is mum on the actual process he created, but he will say this: He creates his truffle oil using a type of olive oil that has very little natural flavoring and infuses as much as half a pound of truffles for two weeks in each bottle to leech out their scent. Then he tops off the mixture with a bit of argon gas to seal the deal.

### To the Diners Go the Spoils

After the hunt, Czarnecki's truffle haul goes straight from forest to kitchen. First, he cleans them with a water spray, and then individually with a toothbrush. They dry, and he wraps them in a paper towel and places them in sealed plastic bags in the refrigerator.

The inside of Oregon white truffles are pristine white when they are in their fruiting stage in the earth. Given a few days in the fridge, their flesh achieves a kind of brown pepperoni pattern. Czarnecki checks each individual truffle every day, giving them the once over with his nose. If they've got *it*—that heady aroma—he'll slice them up and infuse them in oil.

"To bring a flavor out of the earth that's never been experienced before, there isn't a sane person that doesn't like that," Czarnecki says.

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Back at the restaurant, the kitchen staff is abuzz preparing for the dinner rush. Chris Czarnecki puts the final touches on one of his signature dishes, Angel Hair Pasta with Dungeness Crab.

"Let's use the blacks on the angel hair," Jack tells his son.

"I'm not putting black truffles on angel hair, dad," Chris says back. "I'm using the whites."

Since taking over at the restaurant, Chris Czarnecki has tweaked some of his father's recipes to make them his own. They still butt heads on some of the alterations, including the subtleties of black and white truffles.

"This is young person's work," the elder Czarnecki says. He doesn't miss being in the kitchen.

In the restaurant's simple but elegant dining room, Jack Czarnecki uses truffle oil as freely as some might use pancake syrup. He dabs some onto a dish in which to soak freshly baked cheddar biscuits, he fills a pool of black truffle oil to the side of a chocolate ganache torte. And while some people might balk at having a back-to-back menu of truffle dishes, Czarnecki insists that he can never have enough.

He twirls a few strands of angel hair around his fork, and tastes it. Then he leans back and does what most truffle eaters do:

His eyes roll back into his head. *eP*

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**Emily Grosvenor** is a writer and essayist living in Salem, Oregon. She teaches feature writing at the University of Oregon.

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