

TRUFFLE HUNTING ON LANZAROTE

# Papas crías fever



If you see people wandering around in the El Jable plain near Famara after the winter rains, it's because they're in search of the "papas crías", the desert truffle indigenous to Lanzarote. Even though they are nothing like "genuine" truffles, their unmistakable mushroomy taste makes them a sought-after addition to the islanders' menu.

The rainy season on Lanzarote sometimes begins as early as November and changes the character of the island. A sumptuous display of flowers emerges everywhere, and even places like the arid El Jable desert acquire a green sheen which is really quite impressive. Other areas gleam white from the explosive growth of stinking chamomile and crown daisy.

Another phenomenon we can observe during the rainy season is the sudden display of a strange type of behaviour among humans in the sandy areas of the El Jable. Everywhere you look, you can see local people wandering around in circles and figures of eight, in scenery which would normally inspire nothing more than a bored glance from the window of a passing car. Now, however the area is being meticulously picked over, all eyes to the ground. Every now and then someone stoops to dig something out of the ground, which then quickly disappears into the plastic bag or basket they have come equipped with. When enquiring about this unusual behaviour, the reason is quickly explained: these people are

searching for mushrooms, for the "papas crías". The first thing the experts among the collectors happily point out is the "madre de papas crías" – the "mother of the young potatoes", to which the mushrooms they're looking for are attached. It's an inconspicuous, yellow-flowering plant – the Canary Islands' sunrose, *Helianthemum canariense*, that shows you where you might potentially find the mushroom – though there's

#### **papas crías – tips for tasty truffles**

Before cooking, all the sand has to be carefully cleaned off the papas crías. A small sponge or a pastry brush is ideal for this. They should never be peeled, just cut into smaller pieces, if necessary, and fried in a good quality olive oil. Add some gambas (shrimp) or tasty ham to embellish things a bit. If you like, you can whisk some eggs and stir them in. And for the true Lanzarote flavour, don't forget those garlic cloves!



The telltale clue in the search of the "papas crías" is a small crack created in the surface of the sandy soil just alongside the "madre de papas crías", i.e. the sunrose, by the fruiting bodyta have spotted this crack you can start digging for the buried treasure, either with your bare hands or using a simple tool like a spoon.

no guarantee you'll be in luck. The mushroom itself, and its fruiting body, is hidden underground. The telltale clue in the search is a small crack in the surface of the sandy soil, just alongside the "madre de papas crías". It is caused by the fruiting body growing in the earth. Once you have spotted this crack you can start digging for the buried treasure, either with your bare hands or using a simple tool, usually a spoon.

The fruiting bodies look like small potatoes. Normally the mushroom has a diameter of two to three centimetres; sometimes, though, there are reports in the local press of truly wondrous specimens having an amazing size of six centimetres or more.

**A symbiotic association**

The botanical name for "papas crías" is *Terfezia arenaria*, and it is a member of the Mediterranean truffle family. In English it is called the desert truffle. Its natural habitat is Lanzarote, La Graciosa and Fuerteventura as well as parts of North Africa. Like the precious "summer truffle" it is one of the so-called sac fungi. Like all sac fungi, it forms what is known as a "mycor-

rhiza" with another plant, in this case the Canary Islands' Sun Rose. This is a symbiotic association, in which the mushroom supplies mineral nutrients and water to the plant. It absorbs these from the soil with its extensive branching network of cells, called mycelium. The plant is thus to some extent spared having to have a large root system of its own. In return, it offers the mushroom carbohydrates produced by photosynthesis, which the mushroom cannot make itself as it has no chlorophyll. The chemical exchange takes place at the roots of the plant, around which parts of the mycelium form the mycorrhiza.

During most of the year, the desert truffle consists only of the mycelium, which grows completely underground. The mushroom only begins to form its lumpy fruiting bodies after heavy rain.

The desert truffle is a popular item in Lanzarote cuisine. It has nothing like the flavour or monetary value of the famous summer truffle, but it is still worth going on a papas crías hunt and trying out this Lanzarote speciality for yourself some time. And of course, the lovely walk through the fantastic flowering countryside is a free treat.

Horst Wilkens & Ulrike Strecker

**The authors**

Ulrike Strecker and Horst Wilkens are biologists at the University of Hamburg. During numerous visits to Lanzarote they have accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the very special flora and fauna of the island. Much of this can be found in their illustrated volume "Lanzarote – Life on Lava". It depicts the contrast between the harsh environment of the island and the forms of life that have adapted to it. For the first time we see photos taken of the blind and pallid animal life in one of the world's biggest underground lava tunnels. Another book by Horst Wilkens „Lanzarote-Blind Crabs, Hoopoes and Volcanoes" is available in a second edition. The books are available at: Fundación César Manrique, ArcaCanar (Costa Teguisse), Deutscher Buchladen (Playa Blanca), Shop Casa de la Palmera (Teguisse), Librería El Puente (Arrecife), Pardelas Park (Órzola). Another book by Prof Horst Wilkens, Lanzarote, Blind Crabs, Hoopoes and Volcanoes, is available in a second, revised edition. For more information go to [www.naturalanza.com](http://www.naturalanza.com)