

How Luca's Skull Got on My Car Grill (by BoomrBill)

Luca was called the greatest mountain goat truffle forager in the Italian Alps south of Lugano, Switzerland. That's a mouthful, I know, but his spirit lives on, and his story deserves to be told.

Farmers who live in the Swiss and Italian alps often keep sure-footed domestic goats for milk and meat and occasionally, truffle hunting. Normally their goat herds roam and graze freely and return home for food, shelter and companionship. Melania, a pretty gray and white doe who belonged to the Valdino family farm, wandered a little further away one day and met a wild Alpine Ibex goat named Lucas. He was larger with very long curved horns and he charmed her instantly. He had wonderful stories to tell and she thought about joining him and his herd. But, later she thought about the Valdino's, their warm barn and her brothers and sisters and decided to turn down Lucas' offer. He snorted and trotted off.

Melania took all night to find her way home. Finally, she heard the Valdino children calling her and scampered back down to her home in the valley. After a long time, she felt and learned she would have babies, or kids. That happened to the other does, so she felt very happy. Two months later she gave birth to two large kids, a boy and a girl. Their ears were a little different and their fur was all brown. Melania was an excellent and proud mother. Her kids, Luca and Lucy quickly made friends with the other kids and the farmer's family.

Melania was grazing up high on the hills with the herd one day and thought she saw wild Lucas and his long horns up on the crest of the mountain looking down. Then, suddenly he disappeared. By now Luca and Lucy were growing up. They both had longer horns than the others, especially Luca's.



One fall morning, the farmer invited Luca to join him and his dogs on a truffle hunt. He ran along with the dogs and they showed him what to do. He soon understood the truffles had a special smell and when he helped dig them up the farmer gave him and the dogs sweet cakes. Mostly though, finding the dark brown balls was the most fun he had ever experienced. Luca soon was faster to sense the truffles and after a while he thought he even had a power to actually "see" them under the dirt. He never told anyone about that. The farmer was delighted because finding so many truffles so quickly might make him rich.

Soon Luca's special talents were the talk of the valley. Mr. Valdino was able to easily sell his precious earth nuts in the town market for high prices. Luca becomes the greatest and fastest goat, dog or pig at any farm for finding truffles. His farmer built him a special pen filled with fresh hay. He even let Luca go on other hunts with his friends (for a percentage of course.) Luca's life was changing.

On one of his truffle hunts with a neighbor farmer they went high up into the hills where the trees grow smaller and Luca had never been. It was good hunting and they even found some white truffles that were even more prized. While he was sniffing the ground near an old dwarf pine nut tree. Luca felt the presence of something strange and somehow familiar. He turned around to see a great wild Ibex nearby. His curved horns were so long they arched almost all the way to his back. They both tilted their heads. The big Ibex spoke.

"Is Melania well?"

"Mom's fine." Luca replied.

"Come with me."

They both ran together up to the ridge crest. From there Luca could see all the way to Lake Lugano and the snow capped Alps beyond. He bucked and jumped with delight.

Mr. Valdino was furious when the neighbor returned from the hunt without Luca. They searched for weeks. Luca was gone.

Almost a month went by then suddenly Luca returned, limping. Mr Valdino hired an animal doctor from the city to look at Luca.

"Probably just a minor break or a bad sprain," he said.

Luca was put in a cast and kept quiet for a couple of weeks. Soon he was fit and jumping again, ready to hunt.

In the following years Luca never told the other goats what happened. His hunting talents continued to improve. Now it was a real year-round business for the Valdino's and they were becoming quite wealthy.

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I was living 4100 miles away and had never tasted real wild truffles - just truffle flavored salad oils. Soon after I retired, I decided to buy a Eurail pass and just spend some time traveling around Europe with only a general plan and not much of a schedule. Eventually, the amazingly precise EU trains took me to Switzerland. For me this was the most picturebook clean and beautiful place I had ever seen. Large crystal clear lakes between high rugged snow capped mountains, valleys with perfect stonewalled small farms and fairy-tale villages. Some of the train rides were exciting with almost sheer hundred-foot drops on one side and vertical granite faces on the other and sudden blackness as we sped into long tunnels. My nose never left the windows. Finally, my last stop heading south to Milan was Lugano.

I got off there and after strolling the well-groomed promenades around the huge lake I decided to stay for a while. And, what food: cheese fondue with a glass of chilled Petite Arvine and goat stew paired with a hearty Italian Barolo. I may never leave. After two days walking around town staring at cars I'd only heard or seen pictures of: Ferraris, Lamborghinis, and Rolls lined the streets. One of the mountains just to the north, Monte Brè, had a funicula and trails you could hike. I decided to do both: ride up, walk down. The hike down was fun until I got a little lost. Near the edge of the forest was a beautiful farm house. Chagrined, phrase book in hand, I knocked on the door. An older man answered the door.

“Barn jarnow” I said.

“Ah, americano. It's okay, I speak englisha, very good.” he replied.

“Peroni piccola? Berra?”

A nice cold beer. We continued our introductions. The farmer's name was Dominic Valdino and he had relatives in the USA. I gushed about the beautiful mountains and the cleanliness of his country. He told me he and his family had had a small farm 10 kilometers to the south and one of his goats, Luca, had this amazing “prodigioso” a magical power to find “tartufos,” or truffles. It made him a rich man. Luca now lived “the life” in his own little palazzo barn, surrounded by his many grand kids and adoring does.

“This I've got to see.”

So Dominic led me out to a small grass pasture where an ornate white and gold structure stood. The walls had large openings that swung open and held by decorated braces. Inside there was fresh hay, grain mash and running water from a small fountain. In the center was a platform with soft hay and a bright blue fringed blanket. There lay Luca. He raised his head when he saw us.

“Bah hah, mah ha ha heh,” He said.

“Bah ha ha meh,” I replied. Trying to imitate his bleating.



Then he stood, a bit shaky but clearly friendly and curious. Luca walked over and put his head against my stomach, I scratched the bottom of his ears and hairy chin. He looked up at me. Was he smiling?

“He’s never done that for anyone.” said Dominic

I continued rubbing and petting him. Three young kids came over for some petting as well. I spent most of the afternoon with Luca.

Dominic brought out some more berra and told me more stories about his prized goat and his magic powers.

Finally It was time to go.

“Ciao.”

Dominic directed me back to Lugano city and soon after I continued my travels in Italy and later Greece. But Luca and the Swiss Alps will always be the high spot of my trip.

I stayed in touch with Dominic via email and last year when he came to visit relatives in the US, we met in Washington DC for a great truffle and pasta meal at San Lorenzo's downtown. Over dinner he told me that Luca had died not long after my visit to Lugano. He had Luca's head mounted by Italy's best taxidermist and it proudly hung over his fireplace for the last five years. Now, he was moving to a condo on Malta and his wife says he can't bring Luca's head.

"Would I like to have it?"

"He really took to you."

"Oh man. That would be great!" I said.

Two months later, it arrived, beautifully packed, via DHL. I rearranged the cabinets in our dining room and hung Luca just behind where I sat, right at eye-level. Perfect. Until my wife came home. Since she will probably read this, I'll just say that she had some wonderful suggestions regarding alternative locations for Luca's head. The dining room's original arrangement was restored and Luca moved to my studio.

Fast forward. My genius son agreed to find a home for Luca in his new townhouse and he would do an x-ray scan of the mounted head and create a replica of the underlying skull with his new 3D printer. What could be better? Everyone was happy.

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When my new Buick with Italian goat leather seats arrived, I had my son's skull replica mounted on my grill to honor Luca's memory and to amplify my image as a bold adventurer and high altitude fungi hunter. My taste for freshly harvested wild truffles remains keen. Luca leads the way.



Afterword.

At a craft fair, a beautiful gypsy fortune teller with a missing tooth told me,
“A liberal socialist driving a new Prius would back into my car at a farmers market and
crush my Luca skull. I’m so sorry.”

No more back-in parking for me.