

TEACHING NEW DOGS OLD TRICKS



*American truffle farming and the four-legged stars
of a burgeoning industry*



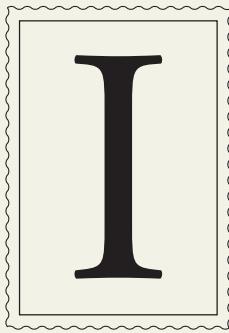
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In the past decade, truffles have gone from being a rare accent in haute cuisine to a household name—once an accompaniment of foie gras, now a condiment for French fries. But their popularity has coincided with a drastic and mysterious decrease in wild truffles. An estimated 80 to 90 percent of French Perigord Black Truffles (*Tuber Melanosporum*) now come from man-made truffières, or truffle orchards. (Only the Italian White Truffle [*Tuber Magnatum*], considered the holy grail of truffles—if not as versatile as the Perigord—is still harvested exclusively from the wild.) Black truffles have been successfully cultivated in France, Spain, Australia and New Zealand, among other locales. But the United States is considered to be a sleeping giant of the farmed truffle industry, with more available truffle-friendly acreage than anywhere else in the world. And the rising stars of American truffles are not just the visionary farmers with their noses to the grindstone, but also the trained dogs with their noses to the ground.

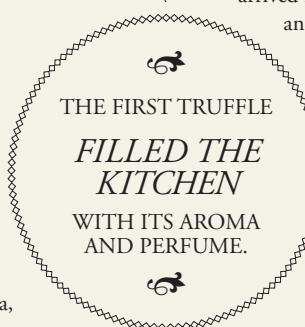
To understand why dogs are so important to truffle cultivation, one must understand the reproductive mechanism of the truffle itself. Truffles can only reproduce by enticing an animal to dig them up, unlike terrestrial fungi that can spread their spores with a mere gust of wind. Truffles smell and taste the way they do because they must work that much harder to lure an animal through a foot or more of soil. It is for this reason that they have evolved their rich, nutty, fruity, alluring flavor. And, when truly fresh, their almost indescribable intensity.

Most people associate truffle hunting with pigs—animals extremely sensitive to truffles because the fungi mimic certain pig pheromones.

"The problem with pigs is that they root," says Jeff Ross, Farmstead Manager at the exclusive Blackberry Farm in Chuckey, Tennessee, who has helped establish a truffle orchard on part of Blackberry's 4,200-acre farm. "Their mouth and nose are right next to each other," explains Ross, "so by the time they find a truffle, it's already in their mouth and they're eating it." A well-trained truffle dog will merely paw at the ground when he or she scents a truffle, and wait for their trainer to come mark the spot or dig it up.

Truffles are being grown in the U.S. by farmers in California, Oregon, Arkansas, Idaho, and North Carolina,

but one of the biggest success stories is in Tennessee, where truffle farmer Tom Michaels has grown 2,500 truffle trees (European Hazelnut and Red Oak) on his 40-acre farm near the birthplace of Daniel Boone. Michaels is one of the few U.S. farmers producing truffles on a commercial scale—200 pounds annually (at \$800 to \$1000 per pound). Michaels received a Ph.D. in fungi biology at Oregon State University in 1976, but didn't begin farming truffles until he moved to Tennessee with his family in the 1990's. Growing truffles requires a tremendous amount of patience—six years at minimum with an average of 10 years before the first significant truffle harvest. When Michaels' first truffles arrived in the winter of 2007, he eagerly packed one in Tupperware and brought it to nearby Blackberry Farm—well known for its culinary pedigree. Blackberry Farm's Jeff Ross recalls the day Michaels arrived with his first truffle, "Tom opened up that container, it filled the kitchen with its aroma and perfume and the chefs laid prostrate at his feet." Immediately, the owner and proprietor of Blackberry Farm, Sam Beall, offered his help to Michaels—sensing the benefit of this local delicacy for his farm-to-plate-centric cuisine. As a scientist and a self-professed "non-dog-person," Michaels quickly recognized that the help he needed would be of the



DIG THIS
Lagotto Romagnolos are the only dogs in the world bred specifically for truffle-hunting.

canine variety. So Beall and his horse trainer, Jim Sanford, went to Italy to procure two of the only dogs in the world bred specifically for truffle hunting: the Lagotto Romagnolo—a friendly, curly-haired Italian water dog. Any dog with a good nose can be trained to hunt truffles. (Michaels has even used a pint-sized Shih Tzu/toy poodle mix named Daisy.) But the difference with the Lagottos, explains Michaels, is “for a dog, walking with their nose to the ground is like a human deep in concentrated thought—you get tired after an hour, you don’t want to do it anymore. But a Lagotto Romagnolo can do it all day.”

Jim Sanford, Blackberry Farm’s horse trainer, had never trained a dog to hunt truffles, but knew he was up to the task. A former



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elephant trainer, Sanford had come with his family to Tennessee to train elephants in the Knoxville Zoo before moving on to his post at Blackberry Farm. Sanford trained their Lagottos to hunt truffles using truffle-oil-scented rags, and later helped his boss import more dogs from Romagna to support a breeding program.

WITH HIS SUCCESS training truffle dogs at Blackberry Farm, Jim Sanford and his mature Lagotto Romagnolo (given the very non-Italian name of Tom), were invited to Oregon by Dr. Charles LeFevre, an organizer

of the annual Oregon Truffle Festival and owner of truffletree.com, a company selling truffle-inoculated hazelnut and oak trees for truffle farming. Sanford and Lefevre began a dog training seminar as part of the festival, and to date, says Lefevre, “about 36 people have taught their dogs to find truffles through the seminar.” Since the program began two years ago, Lefevre has also recruited 13 trainers to participate in either leading the Truffle Dog Training Seminar, or conducting truffle dog demonstrations through the Oregon Truffle Festival. Since the training seminar began, a cottage industry has sprung up in Oregon around hunting the state’s wild truffles, a resource long known but never fully exploited until there were trained dogs to find them at their exact moment of perfect ripeness.

In the opinion of Beall, domestic truffles “can present themselves, not just aside but ahead of a great Perigord Black Truffle shipped over from France.” Beall believes this to be due to their freshness. “It’s a living product,” Beall explains, “a truffle has enough earthiness going for it that you want to capture the fruit while it’s still there.”

Elsewhere in the country, gourmet chefs have come to recognize the value of domestic truffles. Sean Brock, the James Beard Award-winning executive chef of McGrady’s and Husk restaurants in Charleston, S.C., uses Tom Michael’s truffles in his cuisine, and has even hunted truffles at Michaels’ orchard. Brock calls his truffle hunt “one of the coolest things I’ve ever done in my life.” Of the dogs, Brock says, “they never miss. If they scratched [the ground], there was a truffle there.” The difference between a local truffle and an imported truffle is staggering, says Brock. “When you take a truffle out of the ground and stick it up to your nose, you almost pass out. It’s intoxicating; you almost get dizzy. When you get truffles from France and they smell incredible... multiply that times 50.”

Tom Michaels has finally gotten his own truffle dog this year, a Lagotto Romagnolo from Hungary. “I think her name is Brenda,” says Michaels. “See, you can tell I’m not a dog person. Good thing she’s living with her breeder,” he says.

Blackberry Farm is still a few years from their first truffle harvest, but they plan to eventually serve their own Perigord Blacks in their restaurant and allow wintertime guests (truffles are a winter crop) the chance to participate in truffle hunts with their beloved Lagottos.



NOSING AROUND

At left, truffle expert Dr. Charles Lefevre and Blackberry Farm truffle dog trainer Jim Sanford look on as Tom the truffle dog finds a wild Oregon truffle during the annual Oregon Truffle Festival.

Above, an Oregon Truffle Festival participant holds a bounty of wild truffles found by Tom, the Lagotto Romagnolo from Tennessee’s Blackberry Farm.