



CUISINE

# Truffles & Truffle Dogs

BY JANE MUNDY

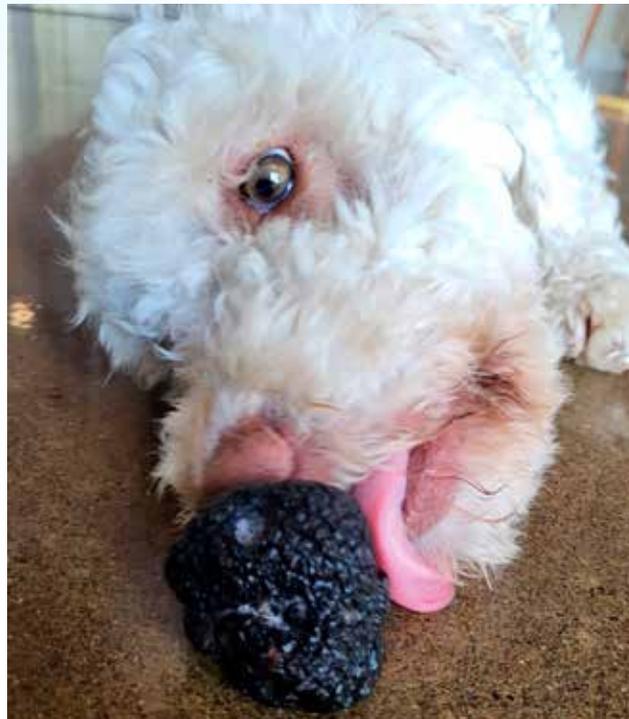
**LATE OCTOBER** starts the truffle season and the lagotto romagnolos, the breed known as the Italian truffle dog, are back at work on Pete and Virginia Brietzke's truffle farm in Parksville. Truffles have been harvested in Italy and France for thousands of years, and recently British Columbia has become fertile territory for cultivating the Périgord black truffle. After all, the Cowichan Valley is known as Canada's Provence. Key to any successful truffle harvest, however, is a well-trained truffle hunting dog.

"Dogs are more reliable and faithful than fickle truffles that have minds of their own," quips Pete. While growing truffles may be a labour of love, breeding truffle-hunting dogs is a sure thing—and the Brietzkes do both.

Pete leashes Katie and one of her pups in-training, and they head into the orchard for a two-to-three-hour hunt. This is not a nature walk. Pete leads them to a row of 50 oak trees with the dogs walking tail up, nose down and the command is "find." Yesterday evening



Virginia and lagottos Lia, Marley and Stella frolicking on their truffle farm.



was Yemma's turn to hunt truffles under a row of hazelnut trees. "I'm looking for their 'nose to ground' cues; they scratch the earth under a tree, indicating where to dig," explains Pete, who is looking for indicators like the absence of grass or a crack in the ground. He delicately scrapes the earth with a three-prong rake as the truffles can be small, and gently digs. "We typically bring back one or two—or none. Sure, it's disappointing when you don't find something but that's part of the payoff when you hit the jackpot." But Pete and Virginia

haven't hit the truffle jackpot yet, which can mean yields up to 60 kilograms per hectare and thousands of dollars per kilogram.

What's so special about these Périgord black truffles? The ancient Greeks and Romans called them the Food of the Gods, and they rank with other elite foods such as caviar and saffron. The French gastronome Jean Brillat-Savarin in 1825 claimed it "the jewel of the kitchen" and an aphrodisiac. The English poet Lord Byron reportedly kept a truffle on his desk, believing its fragrance

would stimulate creativity and attract the muses. The taste is earthy and nutty, rich and deep, with a sensual, musky aroma. Add to that its scarcity and that's why this sought-after delicacy is known as the "black diamond."

For centuries wild truffles grew only in Europe, but truffle cultivation, which has been around since the early 19th century, has enabled this delicacy to be farmed in new places, such as the Pacific Northwest. Cultivation comprises inoculating the roots of oak and hazelnut trees with truffle spores. According to Dr. Shannon Berch, president of the Truffle Association of BC, there's science behind the difficult work of creating a cultivated truffle industry, and you have to make a truffle orchard specifically; you can't create one after the fact. Successful truffle production requires a symbiotic relationship between *Tuber Melanosporum* and its host tree so that the fungus envelops the tree roots and provides mineral ions, phosphorus in particular. (A truffle is the fruiting body of a fungus—a tuber—that grows underground.) In return, the fungus that will grow up to be black Périgord truffle receives carbohydrates. But this association needs to be nurtured, and it takes time.

Virginia's parents imported their first inoculum from Europe in 2003 and now the family is growing and marketing truffle trees inoculated with French black Périgord spores. Pete and Virginia inoculated their Garry oak and hazelnut trees 15 years ago and they now have five acres of inoculated trees. But there are also several factors involved for a successful harvest. Soil pH level is key, along with everything else that dictates growth. The estimated time to the first truffle harvest is five to nine years, like most fruiting trees. And truffles are tasty to pretty much all wildlife. With so many challenges, why bother buying inoculated trees?

"Our customers are mostly interested in doing something different—their green thumbs want a challenge," says Pete. "European customers buy trees because they want a bit of home and Americans buy our dogs to find truffles," says Pete, "but most folks purchase several inoculated hazelnut trees because they are guaranteed to get nuts and truffles later—can't lose."

Berch has a truffle dream for BC that includes "professional truffle dog teams working with truffle growers to ensure that all cultivated truffles harvested in BC are at the peak of ripeness and build a first-rate reputation for cultivated culinary BC truffles."

Lagotto romagnolo truffle dogs originated in the Romagna region of Northern Italy in the 1300s. The first Cana-

dian litter from working truffle lagottos were born at Virginia's parents' Parksville farm in 2008. They typically have just three mothers who will have only three litters in their lifetime, so some people wait years for puppies.

Truffle detection is pretty much the same as finding anything else, like beagles finding narcotics at airport terminals. Virginia starts training the lagottos by spritzing truffle on Mum's teats when her pups are suckling. "Then we put truffle shavings in rice caches tied with an 18-inch string and bury underground but with the top of the string marking the spot," she says. "We walk the puppy past the spot a few times and they are rewarded with treats and hugs when they find the cache."

Italians describe them as "cario," meaning cute. But those

teddy-bear looks are deceiving as they are durable workers, known for their strength and endurance—everything you want as a pet and truffle hunter. "We've been breeding Laggotos for 10 years and Pete still gets teary-eyed when they are adopted, but we know they will be taken care of, mainly to families and often people with allergies," says Virginia. "As well, because the dogs are so quiet, they are great with autistic kids and they're therapy dogs; you can train them to sniff anything, from drugs to diabetes."

While dogs and trees are Pete's passion, Clarence, the family's mini-pig has his snout out-of-joint because truffles are his passion and the dogs are hunting while he stays home. Pete says Clarence finds truffles easily and he's faster than the

dogs, but he needs restraining, otherwise he'll eat them. That's the tough part—some Italians are missing fingers. (Truffle pigs were banned in Italy in 1985.) "Clarence is mostly an ornament now and he doesn't play well with others, but he has an iron will and I only get truffles out of his mouth with a lot of protest and loud squealing," says Pete, with all his fingers.

While the cultivated truffle industry in BC is just starting to take off, there are many native species on the island. We don't know much about what kinds of truffles are here, unlike foragers in Europe. However, Berch told the Vancouver Island Free Daily that, "We have some good, trained truffle dogs, they're out in the woods finding them. I suspect we'll find hundreds [of species]... The dogs have just revolutionized truffles." ■



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