



‘It’s not only James’s dog Max who’s responsible for sniffing out these pungent and prized fungi’

Can you sniff out truffles?

Have you ever eaten eggs with foraged truffles on Christmas morning? Emma Pritchard goes in search of the 'black diamonds that lie beneath' in south Wiltshire – and finds it's not just dogs who can sniff out truffles.

IT'S STILL. The only sound comes from the chilly breeze as it chases off sunbeams through the mosaic canopy of oak, hazel and beech leaves. A sense of secrecy hangs thick in the air.

A furry flash of dirty white breaks the spell, weaving through the trees and setting off an excited tempo of cracks and crunches as it disturbs dried-out debris. Close behind follows the more solid steps of a man, eyes shielded by the brim of a wax hat. "Good boy," he calls, enthusiastically trying to keep pace with his dog despite the uneven footing. "Find it."

Meet James Feaver of The English Truffle Company and his truffle dog. From October to January, this is where you're most likely to find the duo – somewhere deep in the heart of a nondescript woodland – either clambering over branches or stooped, nose to the ground, scent-searching for truffles.

"You know you've had a good day when you go home to find mud all over your face,"

James laughs, referring to the fact that it's not only his dog who's responsible for sniffing out these pungent and prized fungi.

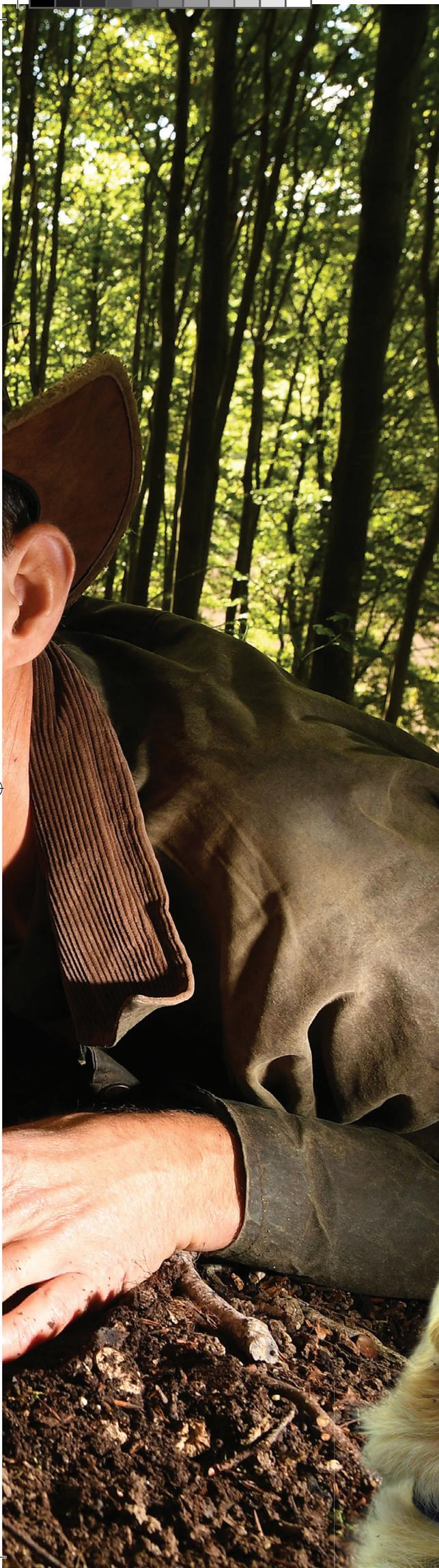
James has been hunting truffles for almost 10 years, a passion and, following redundancy, a business that developed from a lifelong hobby of foraging in his changing surroundings; be it the Gower Peninsula, where he'd catch crab as a child, or the blackberries and elderflowers he would gather on days off while working in Herefordshire and Hampshire.

In Wiltshire, at the start of the millennium, he joined a local mushrooming group, and that's where his fungi fascination really took off. "We'd go out on forays looking for field mushrooms. I suppose it was the thrill of the chase – you never knew what, or how much, you would find. Truffles were the next stage on from that. It was revealed in the press that there was a good source of them not far from where I lived, and I thought, why not have a look."

But, with no idea where to start, James enlisted the help of an expert to get him going: "I had a two-hour session with my late black lab Bramble. He took to it immediately and although we didn't find an actual truffle, I was hooked. I went away and got my wife to hide bits of potato dipped in truffle oil along walking routes around our house for us to sniff out. We got pretty good."

So much so that in 2008, James and Bramble took part in, and won, the UK Truffle Hunting Championships, beating off

Left: James displays the tools of the trade and two large truffles which are part of the haul
Below: Max is just one of James's truffle hounds



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CHRISTMAS BLACK DIAMONDS

competition from 30 other contestants to find the most 'truffles'. It was a few months later, while visiting woodland such as the one we find him in today, that he finally nosed out the real McCoy. "You never forget your first truffle," he says, eyes constantly fixed on his dog, watching for the tell-tale signal that he's found gold. Within a few seconds, there it is.

"The dog always indicates when he's got something; he'll stamp the ground with his paw and wag his tail excitedly," James reveals, rushing over to the spot where his dog is currently beginning to dig. "Good boy," he shouts, easing the dog backwards and rewarding him with a crisp piece of apple, his treat for winning, what is to him, one round in a truffle hunting game.

James lowers his face to the ground, inhaling deeply to determine if there is a truffle and if it is ripe enough to collect. "They smell a bit like raw beetroot," he says. "It's an unmistakable scent." Truffle detected, James begins to excavate the ground, carefully teasing back the earth with a pointed trowel.

"Truffles are the fruiting body of a network of fungus that runs below the ground, following the roots of a tree," James explains. "They live in a mycorrhizal association (a type of symbiotic relationship) so the truffle helps the tree get more nutrients and water from the surrounding soil, while the tree provides

the fungus with sugars and carbohydrates that allow its fruiting body to grow. The network is very delicate so we have to be careful when we dig that we don't cause damage that could take years to repair," he says. Whereas the spores of a mushroom are spread in the wind, those of a truffle are moved by wildlife (badgers, squirrels etc) eating them and then defecating beneath a different tree.

'The more perfect the specimen, the higher the price'

A small knobbly black ball has begun to appear where James has been working the ground. He gently eases it out with his fingers and, for a second the stillness returns: it's a magic moment. "This will have been growing underground since March," he says, rolling it over to check for any damage; the more perfect the specimen, the higher the price it will fetch. "As the days get shorter, the temperatures cooler and the weather more wet, they ripen – this is an autumn or Burgundy truffle. It's the most common type in Britain."

Indeed, when it comes to truffles, there are many to choose from; from the Perigord black that grows in warmer climes to the elusive Italian white, and many other species in between. Unfortunately, changes in land management and increased development have decreased the number of truffles found in the wild since the 18th to 20th century heyday, and now around 70% of all truffles are cultivated. Wiltshire, Winsterslow to be precise, was once the UK capital of the truffle-hunting world, thanks to its alkaline soil and chalk-base (two further requirements for truffles). The recent popularity in local and foraged produce has caused a new spike in demand and James is typically out foraging twice a week for business.

"I've lost count of the number of truffles I've found now but for me, it's not all about that. I'm proud to be continuing an ancient tradition and, even now, when I see my dog make a beeline to a particular spot, my heart skips a beat." WL

• *The English Truffle Company runs experience days throughout the season, as well as providing truffle hunting teaching courses for you and your dog. Visit www.englishtruffles.co.uk*

Below left: Max paws the ground watched by course members; Inset below: Eggs and truffles

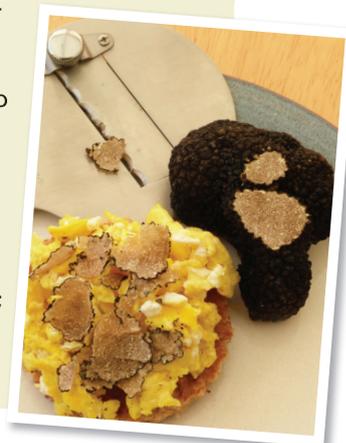


How to get the most from your truffles

STORE: Wash the truffle under running water and gently remove any excess earth with a clean toothbrush. Dry off and place in a sealed container, wrapped in kitchen roll. The truffle will naturally produce condensation; wipe this out every day and refresh the paper. A fresh truffle can last up to two weeks this way.

SAVE: You don't need to use the truffle to benefit from its flavour; they infuse very well. Store your truffle in a container with raw eggs or cheese and when you come to cook with these ingredients they will naturally taste of truffle. You can shave a bit of truffle over the top, but there won't really be any need to.

SERVE: Truffles have a strong flavour so make them the star ingredient and use them to liven up fresh pasta, a risotto or scrambled eggs. Use a truffle shaver to get fine pieces, which intensify the truffle's taste, and stir them through at the last moment; too much heat will damage the flavour.



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