



The Secret lives of **TRUFFLE HUNTERS**

They're more expensive than gold and grow underground in some British woodlands. We accompany **James Feaver**, one of the UK's truffle hunters, on an expedition to find these elusive delicacies

We set out early in the morning, driving down mist-shrouded country lanes. Our destination – top secret. We had been invited out truffle hunting on the condition that we didn't reveal where we were going. This is common practice, as many truffle sites are on private property. Landowners understandably don't want people digging around in their woods. And the truffle hunters themselves are keen to avoid disclosing the location of a delicacy that sells for around £500 per kilo.

IN SEARCH OF SOMETHING SPECIAL

James Feaver is waiting for us as we pull into a layby in front of a small woodland, which is surrounded by six-foot high metal fences. With him is his truffle dog, Jack, a friendly

four-year-old Labrador who is obviously keen to get started. He unlocks the gate and lets us all into the wood.

"It's mainly beech trees in here. Truffles often grow under beeches, and can also be found under oak, hazel, birch, holly and hornbeam trees," he explains.

"We're going to start off by combing it systematically, going crossways to the wind. That creates a scent cone that makes it easier to sniff out the truffles."

As we walk slowly up and down, Jack sniffing the ground ahead of us, James tells me a little more about his background.

"I used to work for Vodafone, and lived the big corporate lifestyle. I never really enjoyed it, though, and when I got made redundant in

"Utter luxury and earthiness combined"

2008, I decided to take some time out to try something else."

He'd always been interested in foraging, and when he heard about a

truffle hunting dog training day, he decided to take part.

"My dog at the time really took to it. So much so, that the trainer suggested we work towards entering the first UK Truffle Hunting Championships. We had a few months to train, and then we actually won it!"

HOW TO TRAIN A TRUFFLE DOG

Many people think that pigs are the animals most commonly used to hunt truffles. In fact, both in the UK and Europe, truffle pigs are only used occasionally, as they have a



tendency to eat what they find.

Meanwhile, dogs can be trained to seek out truffles by using potatoes dipped in truffle oil, or truffle offcuts; they're rewarded with food when they find one. However, James says that not all dogs respond well to training.

"They have to have extraordinary concentration," he explains. "There's so many different scents out here that it can be hard for a dog to focus just on the truffles."

Billy, for example, occasionally runs off on what James says is probably a pheasant trail, and has to be reminded of the task in hand. But before long he has his nose to the ground, and then suddenly he's digging down into the ground, close to one of the beech tree trunks.

We rush towards the site, and James rewards Jack with a cube of cheese.

DIGGING FOR BLACK GOLD

Truffles can grow up to a foot underground, so you have to dig down into the ground to find them. James pulls out a garden kneeling pad and a small, fluorescent yellow pickaxe.

"It has to be this colour so we don't lose it," he explains. "And I spend so much time on my knees I have to look after them."

Using the blunt end of the pick, he gently scrapes away the soil that Jack started to disturb.

"You can see the lumps of chalk. That's exactly the type of soil that truffles grow on," he says. "But it has been quite dry recently, which isn't the best weather for them."

Despite this, however, it isn't long before James pauses.

"There it is."

We watch with bated breath as the gentle movements of the pickaxe soon reveal a dark lump, which James plucks from the soil and holds out for me to see. Underneath the coating of mud, we can see it's dark and

ridged; a little smaller than a golf ball.

James puts it in a cotton bag and we continue on our hunt. Soon Jack starts digging again. This one is located a little deeper underground. James presses his nose against the earth and inhales.

"Sometimes you can smell it," he explains.

And a minute later, a second truffle has joined the first in the bag.

THE ONE(S) THAT GOT AWAY

After a strong start, our progress slows down. It's a while before Jack picks up another scent, and we don't find anything when we dig down. James is philosophical about it, despite having a lot of orders on his books. His business, English Truffles (englishtruffles.co.uk), supplies to restaurants and

individuals around the country. It also runs truffle experience days and truffle dog training sessions.

"There are some sites where truffles grow naturally, and others where the landowners have tried to introduce truffles to the sites themselves. It costs thousands of pounds

to do that, but if you have the money then why not?" he says.

James is sometimes contacted by landowners, and in other cases he'll reach out to them. This happens when he's seen a piece of woodland that looks like truffle growing terrain, either on his explorations or poring over local maps.

"I'll check out the land registry and find the name of the landowner. Sometimes they're quite welcoming – they get 50% of the profit for the truffles – but other times they aren't interested. Some of them open their woods up for hunting pheasants, and they worry that the digging might disturb them," he explains.

We are distracted from our conversation by Jack digging, and race towards him. He's already dislodged a truffle, which we pick out from the beech mast. This one's a little smaller than the others.

"I always feel a little disappointed when I get a small one," James admits. "Because I start to wonder how much bigger it would have grown if I'd left it there."

THE TASTE OF TRUFFLE

Towards the end of our hunt, we notice a rich, earthy aroma, as beguiling as it is complex. It's the truffles, in their cotton bag. Each one produces 30–60 different volatile organic compounds, which are described as having smells such as 'pineapple', 'garlic', 'blue cheese' and 'kerosene'. When all these

mingle together, it's no wonder that many people fall short of describing the smell of truffle. It is, however, a far cry from the punchy, one-dimensional scent of some truffle oils.

"Most truffle oils are infused with artificial scents. They're really strong and overpowering," James says. "You really do have to eat truffles when they're as fresh as possible, as they lose around 5% of their aroma, and their flavour, every day."

What does a truffle taste like? Mushroomy? Slightly. Earthy? A little.

"Utter luxury and earthiness combined," is how food writer Paula Wolfert describes it. "There was a ripeness, a naughtiness, something beyond description."

Intoxicating. Elusive. Sublime. These are the words that food writers use when they taste a truffle. But to truly understand how delicious fresh truffle is, you'll have to try it for yourself.

Three Ways to Cook Truffles

James recommends using truffles in simple dishes to allow their flavour to shine through

1

TRUFFLED SCRAMBLED EGGS

Make scrambled eggs the way you usually do, then thinly slice a truffle and sprinkle it over the top.

2

ROAST TRUFFLED CHICKEN

Before roasting chicken portions, cut the truffle into slices and slide it under the chicken skin. It'll infuse the meat with flavour!

3



TRUFFLE PASTA

While cooking spaghetti, make a sauce by melting butter, adding grated truffle and stirring (don't cook for too long). Add this to the cooked pasta alongside some of the reserved pasta water to prevent stickiness. Garnish with fresh parsley, parmesan and sliced raw truffle.

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