

SCREEN TEST

How valuable is a truffle pig?

EVEN THE MOST PLEBEIAN AMONG US KNOW THAT TRUFFLES ARE PRICEY, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BEASTS THAT FIND THEM? **RALPH JONES** SNUFFLES OUT THE ANSWER

In Nicolas Cage's new film (though he will have made another one before you've finished this sentence), the actor plays Rob Feld, an ex-chef whose beloved truffle pig is stolen. *Pig* explores Rob's anguish and his efforts to find the people who took the animal from him. It's *Taken* but with a pig, basically.

Because you may never have eaten a truffle in your life (just one could easily cost you £100), this could be the first you've heard of truffle pigs. To Rob, however, his is his livelihood – he needs its powerful sense of smell when he is foraging in the woods for those fragrant black fungi. Before long, Rob and an associate are rooting around for answers in a criminal underworld.

The film is not miles away from reality. Truffles are so highly sought that people may trespass on land in order to poach them, poison the animals who have sniffed out the treasure, or stop truffle hunters in their cars in order to steal the truffle haul in the boot. An entire book, *The Truffle Underground*, has been written about these niche crimes.

A reliable truffle pig is a valuable friend. They tend to be female because of a compound within truffles that is similar to a pheromone found in the saliva of male pigs. The fact that the pigs are drawn to the smell anyway means that they require little training. Their natural attraction to the truffles is, however, a drawback: they often try to eat them.

But in 2022 truffle pigs are outdated. "Pigs are not used these days," says



James Feaver of The English Truffle Company. A more realistic title for the film would have been *Dog*. Feaver quotes me £400 for two hours hunting with a truffle hound. Using a pig is illegal in countries like Italy, he says. And there are other disadvantages: moving them around is complicated because of the paperwork required and, "If anyone saw you going into a wood with a pig they would know exactly what you were doing."

Perhaps this is why Rob was so vulnerable: a man with a pig is a rather obvious target. In the film, a price of \$25,000 (£18,400) is given at one point. All in all, this seems about right: though it might gobble the occasional find, a trusty sow could unearth discoveries worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. So, what are you waiting for? Start sniffing.

 Watch Pig

THE VERDICT

Probably best to put a collar on your truffle pig, it could be the most expensive pet you ever buy.