

A black dog, likely a Labrador Retriever, is lying on the forest floor, looking towards the camera with its tongue out. The background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a bokeh effect. The dog is wearing a red leash.

In search of black magic

After years of decline, English truffle hunting is enjoying an exciting revival. Ben Lerwill heads to the Cotswolds to join the search for this highly prized fungus

Main photograph by Millie Pilkington





How to grow or 'adopt' truffles

Growing your own truffles is often far from straightforward, but there are ways of stacking the odds in your favour. Truffles grow best in chalky limestone soils next to certain host tree species—if you don't happen to have the right conditions, soils can be adapted to the right pH level and host tree seedlings can be planted. The English Truffle Company, Black Diamond Truffle Trees and Mycorrhizal Systems either run experience days, sell truffle trees, provide advice on how they can be cultivated or—in the case of Black Diamond Truffle Trees—offer the opportunity to 'adopt' a truffle tree in the Périgord region of France, meaning any truffles it produces are yours to do with as you choose. It's worth noting, however, that with any means of truffle cultivation, there are no hard guarantees of success.

For more information, contact *The English Truffle Company* (0330 133 0805; www.englishtruffles.co.uk); *Black Diamond Truffle Trees* (07738 939033; www.blackdiamondtruffletrees.com) and *Mycorrhizal Systems* (0333 242 7831; www.plantationsystems.com)

Above: Autumn truffles are a key UK species to look for. Below: Ripe truffles are a marbled brown. Preceding pages: James Feaver of The English Truffle Company with his dog, Jack

MUSKY, nutty, earthy, rich in umami. Nature was having a good day when it created the truffle, gifting chefs a flavour so prized that six-figure sums have been known to change hands for single specimens. 'Anyone who does not declare himself ready to leave Paradise or Hell for such a treat,' wrote the French author Maurice Goudek in the 1950s, 'is not worthy to be born again.' That's high praise for an ectomycorrhizal fungus.

France and Italy often hog the headlines where truffles are concerned, but these fragrant, warty treasures are also found in abundance in the UK. They're not always identical to the Continental varieties—you won't find the much-eulogised black Périgord growing wild here—but high-quality truffles can still be unearthed in many corners of Britain, not least the famous swathe of hills between Bath and Banbury.

'There are definitely truffles to be found in the Cotswolds,' proclaims James Feaver of The English Truffle Company. 'The geology ticks all the boxes.' He tells me the story of a retired engineer from Minchinhampton, who was irked by squirrels excavating his lawn until he realised the animals were, in fact, digging for truffles. Rather than cashing in, however, the man gathered his bounty

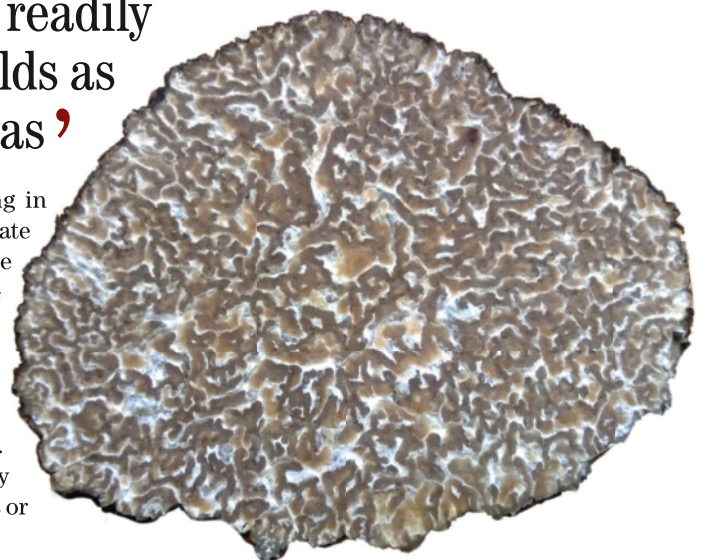
each autumn and enjoyed grated truffle on his scrambled eggs and potato cakes, living the high life in his patch of Gloucestershire. 'Historically, parts of the Cotswolds around Stroud and Dursley have seen good truffle finds,' adds Mr Feaver. 'The Bath and Cirencester areas, too.'

'Think of it all as a kind of subterranean alchemy—one that can happen as readily in the Cotswolds as it does overseas'

Records of truffle-hunting in England go back as far as the late 16th century and, as a cottage industry, it continued in some form until the 1930s. Many professional hunters were based in Wiltshire, travelling to Oxfordshire and beyond in search of the right *terroir*. It was seasonal work, mainly carried out by farm labourers or

woodsmen between the onset of summer and the end of winter. They relied on the astute noses of their dogs, with their fresh bounty often finding its way to the markets of Covent Garden. In 1861, Isabella Beeton herself even included truffle-based recipes in her best-selling *Book of Household Management*.

Later, the UK industry declined. Woodland loss, modern farming methods and urban migration all likely played a part; one theory even suggests that local knowledge was lost forever in the trenches of the First World War. Fast forward to today, however, and English truffles—both wild and cultivated,



typically golf-ball sized—are enjoying something of a renaissance. ‘On warm dishes, sliced wafer-thin, the heat drives the flavour and aroma up to you,’ enthuses Mr Feaver. Cue a chorus of assenting voices.

Back, briefly, to the geology. Truffles grow underground and thrive in chalk and limestone soils. They do best when they’re close to particular species of tree, with beech, oak and hazel being especially good hosts. This relationship between truffle and tree is key. The fruit itself—the truffle—sits at the centre of a web of mycelium threads, some of which bind to the tree’s roots, with others stretching into the surrounding earth, drawing up water and nutrients on the tree’s behalf. In return, the tree transmits sugars to the truffle, which ripens to become the heavily scented delicacy of legend. Think of it all as a kind of subterranean alchemy—one that can happen as readily in the Cotswolds as it does overseas.

The aroma itself is no accident. ‘Because the truffle is below ground and needs to be eaten to spread its spores, it has evolved this incredible scent,’ explains truffle expert Paul Thomas of Mycorrhizal Systems. ‘It’s a way to entice mammals to dig it up.’ The truffle’s delicious smell, in other words, is also its long-term means of survival.

On these shores, the key species to look for is commonly known as the summer or autumn truffle. ‘It gets quite confusing,’ says Prof Thomas. ‘There are two scientific names—*Tuber aestivum* and *T. uncinatum*—but

they’re actually the same species. This is because the truffle has two different peaks, one in summer and one in early autumn. The autumn truffles have more flavour and more aroma.’ To complicate things further, the autumn truffle is also known as the Burgundy truffle. As with any valued commodity, prices fluctuate, but a little more than 2lb worth might sell for more than £500.

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As do many of Nature’s gifts, however, truffles need to be eaten fresh and ripe. Should you make the mistake of unearthing them too soon, you’ll be able to tell. ‘If the truffle hasn’t matured properly, it will still be whitey cream inside,’ says Mr Feaver. ‘Ripe truffles have more of a marbled, chocolatey-brown colour. Unlike a tomato, you can’t ripen an unripe truffle. You can’t put it on your windowsill.’

Finding the truffles in the first place is also tricky—unless you and your animal companion have the requisite know-how.

‘We went back to the Cotswolds at Christmas with our truffle dog and were really surprised by how easily he was finding them,’ says Bianca Bate, who moved five years ago to a farm in the Dordogne, where she and her husband run a tree-adoption company named Black Diamond Truffle Trees. ‘We were going for half-hour walks along little woodland lanes and coming back with six truffles in our hands.’ These walks took place a few miles outside Stroud (but keep that under your hat). Truffles are most commonly found on woodland edges or in woodland clearings, often in areas with dappled light; some hunters also believe south-facing slopes are more likely to yield results. But before you get a spade out, know that you can’t always assume you’re free to do so.

‘In the *Magna Carta*, it specifies that you can forage and take anything above ground,’ says Prof Thomas, ‘but when it’s below ground, with roots and tubers and things like that, you’re supposed to have the landowner’s permission.’ And, of course, you need the right animal. Mrs Bate’s dog, Duggy, is a young Lagotto Romagnolo, an Italian breed famed for its ability to find truffles. ‘They’re very easy to train,’ she says. ‘They’ve got a great sense of smell and they instinctively dig, but they don’t eat the truffle.’ This last point isn’t true of pigs, which have traditionally been used to hunt truffles in parts of the Continent. Pigs might have superb noses, but they’re also mighty fond of gobbling what they find; as a result, there are unpleasant tales of owner brutality. ‘Also,’ Mr Feaver points out, ‘you probably wouldn’t want a pig on the back seat of your car for very long.’

Dogs, on the other hand, tend to be a joy to work with—and you don’t need to own a Lagotto Romagnolo. ‘I’d say any dog can be trained to seek out truffles,’ notes Prof Thomas. ‘I’ve seen corgis, wolfhounds, poodles, everything. Spaniels are brilliant because they’ve got lots of energy and want to please, but the first dog I trained was a labrador and they’ll do anything for food, so that was easy.’

The training itself involves scent work, and getting the dogs accustomed to the truffle aroma. As well as lacing balls and dog toys with fresh truffle or hiding scented treats around the house, some owners even go so far as dabbing the mother’s teats in truffle oil, ensuring puppies are familiar with the smell from the get-go.

If all this sounds like hard work, don’t be disheartened. Back in 2008, a primary school on the fringes of the Cotswolds made headlines after its children uncovered some 10 summer truffles from the school vegetable patch, in the shade of an oak tree. These remarkable fungi might sometimes be elusive—but they’re out there. 🍄

A taste for truffles

‘Keep it simple—you can’t go wrong doing anything with eggs,’ recommends James Feaver. If you store your truffles in the fridge in a sealed container or glass jar, you can actually keep fresh eggs in there with them. The eggshells are porous so the flavour goes right through—when you cook the egg, you won’t even need to put truffle on it.

‘Truffle also goes really well with cheese. Get yourself a British brie or camembert, cut it in half horizontally like a sandwich, shave the truffle in, put the lid back on then keep it in the fridge for a couple of days in cling film. When you get it out, take the cling film off, wrap it in foil, bake it in the oven, so it’s nicely melted, then eat it with really good crusty bread.’

