



By Steve Werblow

# Buried treasure

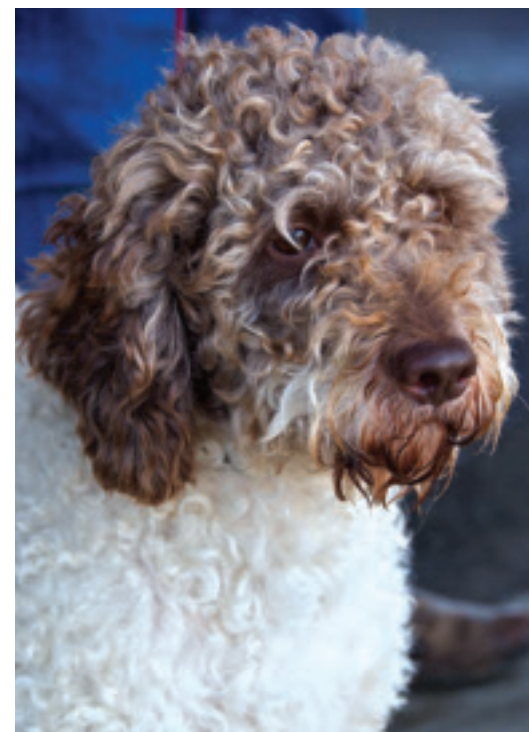
These truffle trees bear their precious fruit underground

Call it the ultimate Easter egg hunt—trailing a dog through a grove of trees to find buried treasure. The dog sniffs. The handler peers at the ground, looking for a telltale brulée of dead vegetation ringing the trunk of a promising host, or a subtle crack of the soil. The dog paws at the ground, hot on the scent of a ripe target. Pushing aside the duff and scraping a few inches into the cool earth, the elusive quarry is in sight: a fresh truffle.

It certainly doesn't look like much—most truffles look like gnarled, rotten golf balls. But few foods can reach up through people's noses and grab such firm hold of their imaginations. Chefs get dreamy-eyed. Foodies go ecstatic. Bible scholars debate whether truffles were the manna that sustained the Israelites in the desert. And many people find their thoughts turning to love. Passionate love.

**Farmed truffles.** More than 40 species of truffles appear around the world, from the famous black truffles of Perigord, France, to the deserts of Namibia. There are native truffles in Oregon and Texas. Truffles from Burgundy are being introduced to Missouri. In fact, over the past decade, the art of cultivating truffles has begun to spread like the fungi themselves—quietly and mysteriously.

**Left:** Searching for hidden caches of white Oregon truffles is the perfect recipe for a peaceful—and rewarding—winter morning. Gentle digging and harvesting helps preserve the fungus for decades.



"The proof-of-principle phase is done," declares Charles Lefevre, founder of New World Truffieres in Eugene, Ore. "We know it can be done and done profitably. We're starting to see avant-garde farmers getting into it."

A successful truffiere, or truffle orchard, can be established across a wide swath of North America. Basically, says Lefevre, if someone can grow wine grapes in the area, you can grow truffles there, too.

"The more valuable species can be grown in areas with relatively mild winters," Lefevre adds. Périgord-style black truffles (*Tuber melanosporum*) that wholesale for \$600 to \$900 per pound thrive in the Pacific Northwest. Some intrepid growers there are trying to raise Italian whites (*T. magnatum*), the delicacy whose wholesale price approached \$2,500 per pound last winter.

At \$125 to \$400 per pound, Burgundy truffles (*T. aestivum*) command a fraction of the price of black truffles. But Lefevre's annual yield projection of 20 to 50 pounds per acre when an orchard hits full production could make them plenty profitable in the colder Midwest and Northeast.

**Decisions.** Choosing the right host tree is just as important as the right truffle species. Skillfully inoculated oaks have greater success in yielding truffles and can bear fruit for decades. However, it can take five to 12 years for oaks to produce their first truffle. Hazel-nuts can start bearing in four to eight years, but the trees don't live as long, and the fungi



**Above:** At the Oregon Truffle Festival, truffles turn a crab melt into an unforgettable meal.

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"We're starting to see avant-garde farmers getting into it."

—Charles Lefevre

**Middle left:** Trained truffle dogs, like this Lagatto Romagnolo, sniff out only ripe truffles, leaving the others to gain in aroma and value. **Left:** Grechen Pruett studied Burgundy truffles in Missouri.





**Top:** Trees and truffles are linked metabolically.

**Above:** Charles Lefevre became enchanted with truffles during his Ph.D. studies. Today, he is a leading producer of spore-innoculated trees.

don't establish as well. Establishing a truffiere costs about \$10,000 per acre. And once those trees are planted, it's up to the truffle to out-compete other soil organisms—weeding and cultivation help tip the balance, but it's vital to favor your fungus right from the start.

**Consider climate.** It all starts with good soil. “You want a site that currently doesn't have trees on it,” Lefevre says. “If you have to clear trees, give it a fallow period of one year minimum. Truffles need more air in the soil than their competitors do. It cannot be a soil that has been compacted—one of the worst sites would be an area that has been overgrazed in the wet season.”

Plan for long-term survival. “You need to think about a host plant that's adapted to your local environment,” notes Grechen Pruett, a Florida-based consultant who did her Ph.D. research on establishing truffles in Missouri.

Drainage, good rainfall (or irrigation) in the summer, and high soil pH are important. So is a slope that warms the truffiere in cool regions or shades it in hot areas.



**Above:** Shaved white truffles add rich high notes to gourmet dishes; black truffles richen cooked sauces.

Jack and Susan Shipley of the Applegate Valley, near Grants Pass, Ore., believe the 200 hazelnut trees they and partner Mike Amaranthus inoculated with black truffle spores six years ago show signs of producing. The Shipleys spent 2009 battling gophers, which they think ate their orchard's first truffles.

**T**hey also planted another 200 inoculated oaks and hazelnuts in 2008, and are training two of their dogs to hunt truffles. Now it's time to sell. The Shipleys plan to FedEx freshly dug truffles to chefs. “We're also looking at truffle oils and other things that don't need to move so quickly, which we can sell through local wineries,” Jack adds.

In New York, Vincent Jeanseume of truffle importer Sabatino Tartufi says the age of American truffles is upon us. “You're producing foie gras in America, making great olive oil, making great wine,” he says. “There's no reason you can't grow truffles here.” **H**