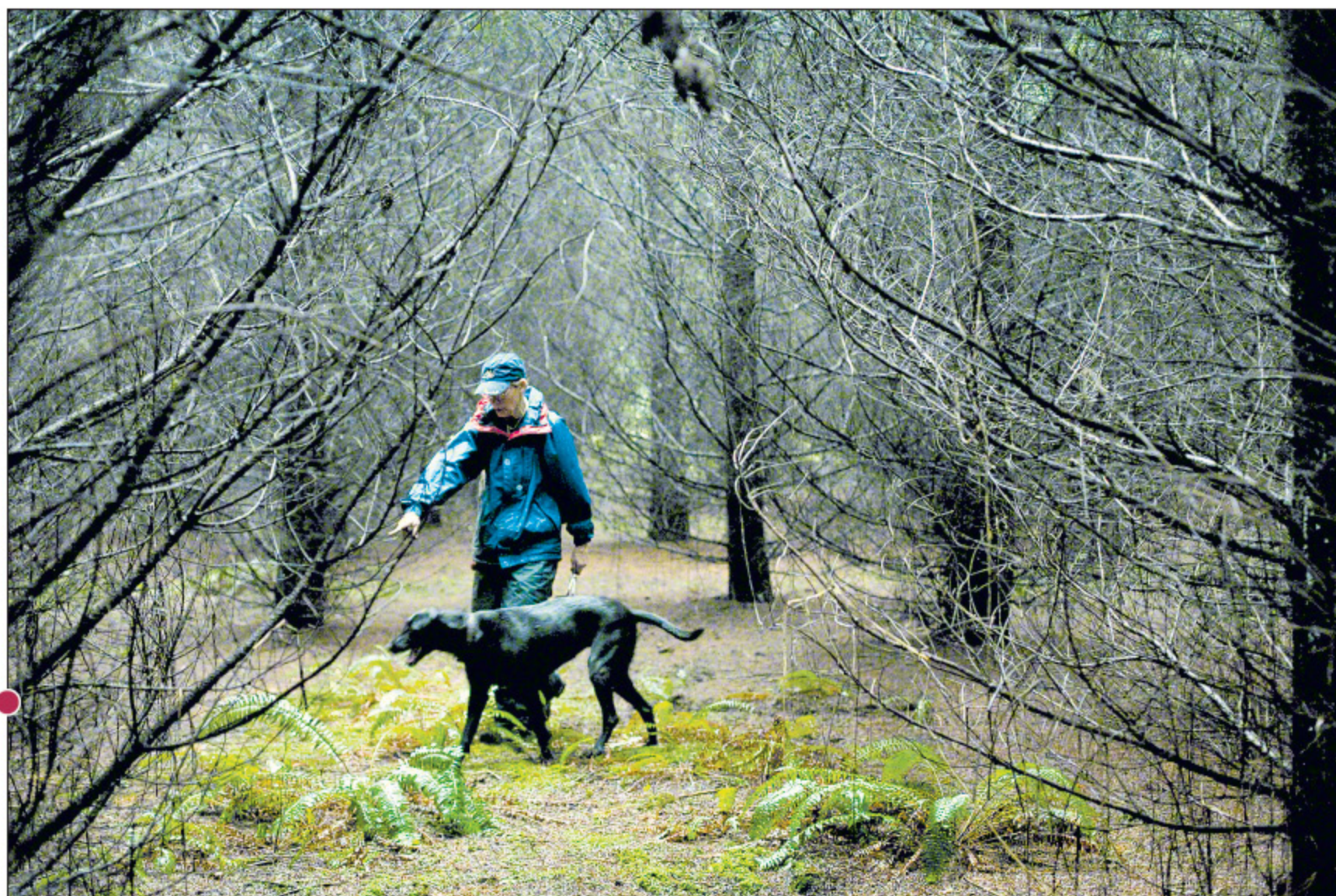


THE BEST AT THE MARKET, IN YOUR KITCHEN AND ON YOUR TABLE

“The dog ignores truffles with no scent and only chooses the ripe ones. It’s really the only way to ensure the truffles you’re harvesting are worth serving, without causing all the habitat destruction that raking does.”

Charles Lefevre
truffle tree
nursery owner



Photos by FAITH CATHCART/THE OREGONIAN

Trufflehunter

Oregon joins a trend in which canines sniff out the fragrant fungi while protecting the surrounding area



By **LAURA McCANDLISH**
SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Until last year, Gusto, a 6-year-old search-and-rescue black Labrador retriever, didn't know a sumptuous truffle from a poisonous puffball mushroom. While she had sniffed out crime scenes and searched for cadavers since she was a puppy, her Eugene-based owner, Jean Rand, found it difficult to go out on those 3 a.m. calls. Wasn't there a more regular daytime pursuit for Gusto's keen nose?

Enter Charles Lefevre, who owns a leading truffle tree nursery and needed dogs to find his maturing orchards' underground fruit. Europeans historically hunted truffles with pigs,

to which the irresistible musky aroma smells like a boar in love. Today, most foragers of wild truffles and those who cultivate them prefer trained dogs. Lefevre, an OSU-trained mycologist, envisions a broader benefit of hunting with hounds: boosting the culinary reputation of Oregon's native truffles.

Among the many varieties of truffles, four species of Oregon truffles are favored for cooking: the plentiful winter whites and spring whites, both with scents of ripe cheese and acetone; the rarer pineapple-chocolatey blacks; and the elusive, garlicky Oregon browns.

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Beneath the loamy forest floor lie knobby nuggets prized by serious foodies. Hunting truffles was once primarily a job done with pigs, but now most foragers, such as Jean Rand, prefer dogs, which are easier to transport and won't eat the fragrant lumps. **Recipes for truffles and other fungi on FD6.**

Truffles: Truffle festival at end of month

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Although the Pacific Northwest isn't the only place in the U.S. that produces truffles, the wild morsels found in Northern California, Oregon and Washington (all called "Oregon" truffles) are the most coveted noncultivated ones.

Whether from the Périgord region in France, the Piedmont in Italy or the Pacific Northwest, truffles achieve their fabled fragrance and flavor only when ripe. And when humans blindly rake them up by hand, they often harvest truffles that are unripe.

"The dog ignores truffles with no scent and only chooses the ripe ones," Lefevre says. "It's really the only way to ensure the truffles you're harvesting are worth serving, without causing all the habitat destruction that raking does."

For now, the Oregon Truffle Festival, organized by Lefevre and celebrating its fifth year in Eugene Jan. 29-31, is one of the few places to sample the more pungent local truffles found by dogs.

Lefevre has converted some formerly skeptical chefs to Oregon truffles, including Philippe Boulot of the Multnomah Athletic Club and Carafe's Pascal Sauton, who join Naomi Pomeroy and Gabe Rucker on the bill for the event's gala dinner.

Others still need convincing. Alba Osteria's Kurt Spak says Oregon white truffles are next to "useless" — no substitute for the aromatic Italian whites. At Carlyle, chef Jake Martin shaves local whites over an

Festival tickets

Tickets for the Jan. 29 day-long dog-training demonstration were still available at press time for \$275. The two-day seminar is sold out. You can buy a full festival package for as much as \$1,000, or pay as little as \$15 for the Jan. 31 Oregon Truffle Marketplace, which includes tastings as well as dog demonstrations. For more information, go to oregontrufflefestival.com.

appetizer of bay scallops and celeriac purée but still admits, "I love Oregon and all, but they don't quite stand up to the Albas or French blacks."

Culinary benefits aside, dogs quickly root out deeper, bigger specimens, often in brushy areas people avoid. Such targeted foraging protects the tree roots, threadlike mycelium (the cells that spawn truffles) and forest loam, which indiscriminate raking destroys, says the Corvallis-based North American Truffling Society. France and Italy now largely rely on dogs. Heftier hogs were hard to transport; dogs hop in the back seat of a car. Dogs also are less prone to gobble up the unearthed morsels.

The U.S. is just waking up to truffle dogs. They're more in demand as entrepreneurs such as Lefevre plant truffle orchards with oak and hazelnut seedlings, their roots inoculated with the fungus. North Carolina has the most new plantations, spurred by state money reserved for transitioning tobacco farms. New Zealand and Australia, whose cultivated truffle production dwarfs that of the U.S., also harvest with dogs.

Under the command of Rand, a veteran dog trainer, Gusto barks down truffles throughout the Willamette Val-



Gusto, a 6-year-old Labrador retriever, had a midlife career change, switching from search and rescue to truffle hunting. Owner Jean Rand says Gusto isn't interested in eating the fragrant fungi, she just loves the hunt. Gusto will demonstrate her keen skills at a truffle-dog training class at the upcoming Oregon Truffle Festival.

FAITH CATHCART
THE OREGONIAN

ley, sniffing out likely spots such as young Douglas firs on vineyards and old Christmas tree farms. The first job of Gusto's truffle-hunting career was locating some of the 32 pounds of "black diamonds" cooked up at last year's truffle festival.

Now, when out on an ordinary hike with Rand, Gusto will catch the truffle scent 100 feet away. "She'll find it and come blazing down the hill barking at me, going, 'Guess what I found,'" Rand says. "I don't think a lot of truffle dogs are taught to go find it and come back and tell you, but because she's done search-and-rescue, when she gets a track, she's gone."

Cultivated Périgord blacks wholesale for about \$1,000 a pound; piquant Alba whites can cost three times as much. However, the most expensive Oregon black truffles only go for about \$300 a pound — and this season sometimes less, thanks to

the December cold snap that damaged the crop. If exclusively harvested by dogs to assure ripeness, Oregon truffles could sell for as much as their European rivals, Lefevre says.

For the first time, the Oregon Truffle Festival features a two-day dog-training seminar, with a hunt for wild specimens on a Kings Valley property. Rand and Gusto will be joined by French truffle expert Pierre Sourzat, who hunts with a yellow Lab, and former elephant trainer Jim Sanford, who works the Lagotto Romagnolo breed of truffle dog at the Blackberry Farm resort in Tennessee.

Italians, and some other hunters here, swear by the poodlelike Lagottos. Like Labs, Lagottos were originally bred as waterfowl retrievers. Oregon doesn't have any of the dogs working; the closest truffle-tracking Lagottos live on Vancouver Island. As puppies, the

dogs fetch between \$2,500 and \$3,500. Importing a trained one from Italy costs significantly more.

It doesn't take a pooch with a fancy pedigree to find truffles. You can imprint any mutt with the scent, but it could take months or years for success in the field. Trained scent-detection dogs are ideal. Everything from beagles to German shepherds, even to miniature dachshunds, can be trained to track truffles.

There are at least two known truffle dogs working in Oregon: Gusto, and another purebred black Lab named Zoe. At the festival, hobbyist mushroomer Eric Lyon will demonstrate the latter dog's skills. "Now, we just need about 998 more (dogs)," Lefevre says.

There could soon be a third: Anne Seward, who plans to plant inoculated hazelnut trees on her Newberg farm, is teaching her

dog (another black Lab) to smell truffles. While his first few forays were unsuccessful, Cooper at least finds the truffle-oil-rubbed toys Seward hides around her Southeast Portland home. "He really loves the game," Seward says. "It's an opportunity for him to have a job, to pay for some of that dog food."

It's not the culinary possibilities that motivate most dog lovers; Rand hadn't tried truffles until last January. Nor does Gusto care for their taste. It's the thrill of tracking — and then being rewarded — that keeps them going. "I wouldn't be out there hunting truffles, or any mushrooms, if it weren't for the dog," Rand says.

Laura McCandlish is a Corvallis-based writer who blogs at baltimeoregon.com. She co-hosts a food show on KBOO 90.7 FM the third Wednesday of the month at 11 a.m. (kboo.fm/foodshow).