

Searching for Buried Treasure with
Truffle Dogs
at the OREGON TRUFFLE FESTIVAL

Kathryn Elssesser photo



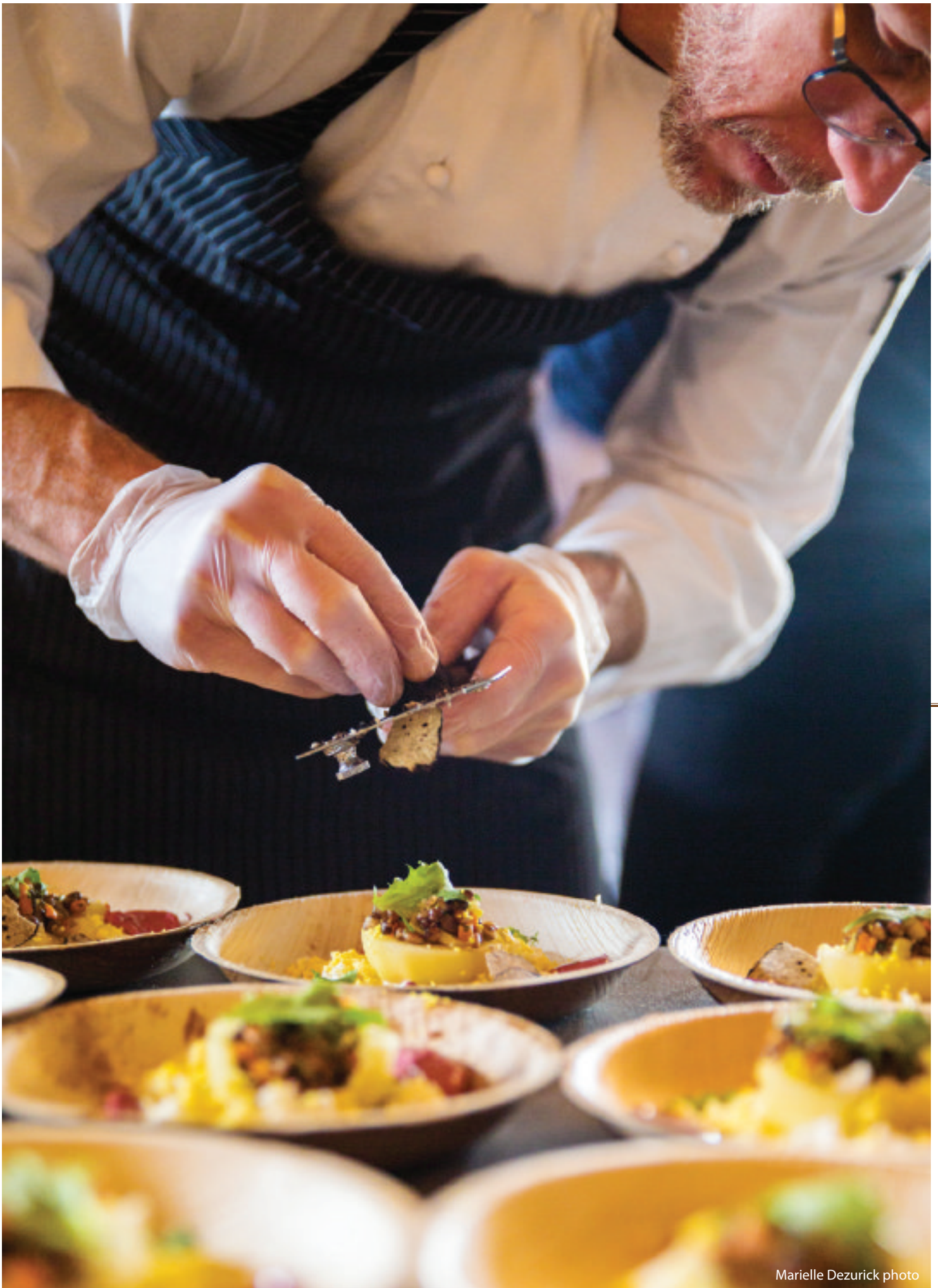
story by **LAURIE WALLACE-LYNCH**

Mia, a 10 year old Labradoodle “truffle dog” bounds ahead of us into the forest, nose to the ground, madly sniffing as her head swings back and forth like a bobble head. Her owner, Kristi Anderson from Eugene, Ore. follows closely behind as our group of newbie truffle hunters do our best to keep up. Mia stops, sniffs and gently paws at a spot of earth. Anderson carefully puts her hand spade into the earth, gently pushes the earth aside and discovers buried treasure. It’s an Oregon white truffle – a mushroom, not the chocolate kind – that’s about the size of a large grape. Our enthusiastic group gathers around to see our first wild truffle. Frankly, it doesn’t look like much. It’s off-white, rather misshaped and covered in dirt—a truffle won’t win any beauty prizes, yet in terms of taste, this natural edible delicacy packs a flavour wallop, earning wild truffles the Miss America title of the culinary world.

Truffle hunting with trained dogs and their owners is part of a rare, one-of-a-kind experience at The Oregon Truffle Festival in Oregon’s famed Willamette Valley in wine country. It is one of the premier food festivals in North America, voted as one of the Top 10 Best Specialty Food Festivals by *USA Today*.

The Truffle Festival happens annually in late January, headquartered at the beautiful, and dog-friendly, Hilton Eugene. More than 2,000 people flock to the event each year—truffle dog owners, truffle entrepreneurs, chefs and foodies, and those who want to experience what it is like to go hunting for truffles with trained truffle dogs.

Truffles are subterranean fungi that grow in the wild as small tubers on the root systems of trees. They are found in Europe and many countries around the globe. There are several species, but the Pacific Northwest is known for the Oregon white and black truffles. They are mostly found beneath Douglas fir trees in this region, but can also be grown commercially by inoculating the root system of trees with truffle spores. »



Marielle Dezurick photo

John Valls photo



«It's easy to see why the wild truffle is such a delicacy, fetching about \$40 to \$200 a pound. After about an hour of roaming through the woods, Mia has managed to unearth about a dozen truffles; enough for each person in our hunting party to take a truffle home. I have my truffle wrapped in Kleenex, hidden in my pocket, my hand guarding it like it's the "Precious" golden ring from *Lord of the Rings*.

Some would argue that the truffle is just as valuable.

"Truffles put off a distinct aroma because they want to be found, and it is that aroma that we train dogs to smell," explains Bob Walker who leads a Truffle Dog Hunting training class. "Their strong aroma attracts animals to find them and when a truffle opens, this helps it reproduce in nature."

Truffle dogs come in all shapes, sizes, and breeds. Surprisingly, almost any dog can be trained as a truffle dog. This year's winner of The Joriad North American Truffle Dog Championship Competition was a Labrador Retriever named Joey, owned by Ava Chapman. In 2018, the title was awarded to Gustave, a Chihuahua mix owned by Marcy Tippman. »

DID YOU KNOW:

Truffles, which are classified as a fungi, are usually found around the roots of such trees as beech, poplar, oak, birch, hornbeam, hazel, and pine? Truffles' spores are dispersed thanks to fungi-eating animals, called fungivores, of which there are many. There are even more that are actually omnivores but also consume fungi.



John Valls photo

We had a farm in the hills where the grapes grew wild.
It's sandy soil and dry breezes across the bench
fanned sunny heat rising from the valley below.
It cried out to be the perfect vineyard.

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DID YOU KNOW:

There are a few different types of edible truffles? These include: white truffles, black truffles, summer or burgundy truffles, garlic truffles and even a few other species of fungi often referred as a truffle. They are coveted by foodies but used sparingly thanks to their high price tag, as well as their strong, but fabulous, taste. Some truffles are used raw, shaved or diced thinly and topping a variety of foods.

«The Lagotto Romagnolo Italian Water Dog, which originates in Italy, is considered the ultimate breed of truffle dog. Jim Sanford of Tennessee breeds and sells Lagottos at Blackberry Farm and personally delivers the dogs to owners around the globe.

Many people come to the festival to learn how to start a truffle growing business. Charles and Trudy Medhurst travelled from Chicago to attend the festival for the second year in a row. “The first time we came because we love truffles and are big foodies and wanted to attend the Grand Truffle Dinner, but this time we are attending the Truffle Grower’s Forum because we are thinking about getting into the truffle business,” explains Trudy. “We are looking at the possibility of finding some land and perhaps starting a truffle farm as a hobby. It takes about five to seven years for truffles to mature, so this could be a business for us for down the road.”

A mission of the festival is to showcase the culinary diversity of truffles. “We look to find ways to showcase the wide spectrum of flavours and aromas that truffles offer from infused items like truffle oil to shaving fresh truffles over risotto or using truffles in desserts,” says Charles Ruff, culinary director of the Oregon Truffle Festival. “White truffles can be used in heavy cream for desserts. We have about 15 culinary events over the weekend including breakfast, lunch and dinner with truffles on every plate at every meal!”

A few highlights of the “all truffle weekend” include the Forage & Feast and Lunch at the Silvan Ridge Winery, a Villa Evening at Pfeiffer Vineyards, and the showcase event; the Grand Truffle Dinner. This six-course dinner features truffles in every dish, prepared by 45 guest chefs. Each course is paired with a special wine from six different Oregon wineries. Here’s just a sampling—

the fourth course featured Quail and Foie Gras Truffled Wontons in Superior Broth with Dates, Shitake, and Oregon White Truffles prepared by Thomas and Mariah Pisha-Duffly, served with Grochau Cellars 2016 Zenith Vineyard Pinot Noir – Oregon is renowned for Pinot Noir.

“From sake to white varietals to big Oregon Pinot Noirs, to truffles and other local foods, Oregon has a magical bounty that is much more than truffles,” adds Ruff. “From forest, streams, ocean, agriculture, vineyards, and artisanal products, this festival provides a rich platform to showcase native truffles with the best we have to offer.”

You can purchase fresh truffles at the Fresh Truffle Marketplace and Lecture Series, but go early as they sell out quickly.

“For someone who has never tried a truffle, it is the ultimate food experience,” explains Ruff. “Something happens on your palette and then your brain activates with a blissful experience. There is science that supports this. It is a mesmerizingly special culinary experience that will transport you to a sense of satisfaction that is relatively unique in the culinary world. Once you experience truffles—there’s no going back. You become an advocate for life and crave this addictive culinary sensation!”

The 2020 Oregon Truffle Festival Eugene Weekend takes place Friday to Sunday, Jan. 24 to 26 with The Joriad competition on Thursday, Jan. 23. The Yamhill Valley Truffle Weekend is happening from Friday to Sunday, Feb. 14 to 16, 2020. For more information visit oregontrufflefestival.org. »



Marielle Dezurick photo

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Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance is not available at opening and will open December 5, 2019.

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