

# Dog, owner hunt for Northwest truffles

By COURTNEY FLATT  
Northwest News Network

The forest smells slightly damp. Grasses cover logs. Sticks decay on the ground. Unknown animals have surely left scents as they traipse about, eating meals and wandering around this recently thinned stand about an hour north of Seattle.

But all those smells — undetectable to the human sniffer, or at least this allergy-suffering reporter — don't matter to "Lolo," a lagotto romagnolo. The Italian dog is hot on the hunt for black truffles.

"They're often called Oregon black truffles, but we have quite a lot of them in Washington. They just beat us to the naming," said Alana McGee.

Besides truffles, just about the only other scent the dog cares about is the bag of steak and chicken that Lolo's owner, McGee, carries in her pocket. The tasty morsels are dolled out as a reward each time Lolo sniffs out the fruity truffles, sometimes buried a foot underground.

It's Lolo's ninth birthday — hence, the steak.

"Last week my husband accidentally overcooked some tri-tip, so I cut some of it up for the dogs. They were pumped," McGee said. "They actually work better for higher value treats. I've realized that they prefer steak, but I can't do that every day."

To get that steak, Lolo runs from truffle to truffle. To the untrained eye, it appears she's picking spots of grass or dirt beneath branches at random. But it's taken years of training for Lolo to become so proficient at hunting down the fruity, floral smelling fungi — she even finds one the size of a pea, several inches underground.

"At this location the other week, she found one that was over a foot and a half down," McGee said.

Lolo taps her nose to the dirt and backs up. Often she'll start to furiously scratch at the ground as McGee runs to catch up.

"Oh, right there? Hold on. Wait, please, wait. Where? Can you show us?" McGee calls to Lolo as she starts to dig.

McGee ferrets through the dirt until she finds Lolo's treasure. She plunks the mud-covered fungus into a woven basket and repacks the dirt and grass. If she's not fast enough, Lolo grows impatient, whining for her steak, sometimes trotting off in search of her next hidden gem.

Or, as McGee sits next to Lolo, a moment too late: "The problem with Lolo is if we don't stay with her, she does that, which is eat them."

Lagotto romagnolo dogs have been used for truffle harvesting for hundreds of years in northern Italy. But, with a focus on training fundamentals, McGee said any dog can learn to sniff out the fungi, from chihuahuas to huskies to great danes. As a part of her business, Truffle Dog Co., she's trained them all (and their humans) to search for truffles.

## A Northwest delicacy

In the Northwest, truffles don't only smell good to people and dogs, many animals also scarf on the delicacies. Wildlife like deer, bear and squirrels then spread the truffle spores around Douglas fir forests, after they're finished digesting.

The U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station documented more than 350 truffle species in the Northwest, including in Northern California and parts of Idaho and British Columbia, Canada. The researchers say this region grows more types of truffles than any other place on the planet, except Australia. Some species are considered sensitive. People don't eat many of the truffles that grow here.

"The Pacific Northwest has been a hotbed of evolution for the development of truffle fungi," wrote Randy



Photos by Courtney Flatt/Northwest News Network

**TOP:** Sometimes Alana McGee, owner of Truffle Dog Co., has to help her dog, 'Lolo,' find truffles buried under sticks and logs. McGee always repacks the dirt after they find a truffle. **ABOVE:** Truffles found in the Northwest. **LEFT:** Jamie Hunt, left, and Holly Robinson opened Fast Penny Spirits during the coronavirus pandemic. They use locally sourced ingredients, including Northwest truffles, in both styles of amaro liqueur they sell.

Molina, a retired botanist, in a newsletter after his 2009 report was newly published.

For culinary truffles, people may be most familiar with Italian white truffles or French or Perigord black truffles, delicacies that can fetch exorbitant prices per pound.

Three types of truffles are used for cooking in the Northwest: white, black and, less often, brown.

harvested with methods other than animals, McGee said.

"About 80% of the native truffles you're going to find in the Northwest market are still not found by dogs," McGee said, just as Lolo finds another truffle. "Oh, there it is. Good girl. Thank you. They are harvested via rake."

McGee said dogs disturb a much smaller amount of the forest floor.

## Sustainable harvesting

Sustainability is a big part of McGee's harvesting. She initially discovered truffles in Italy. Then she moved home to the Northwest and found out truffles grew here, too.

While prime truffle hotspots are often tightly kept secrets, the most prolific sites are found in Oregon's Willamette Valley, also home to the annual Oregon Truffle Festival, based in Eugene.

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Alana McGee | owner of Truffle Dog Co.

The 2009 report says that the most common method of harvesting truffles in the region has contributed to a "lackluster" reputation for Pacific Northwest truffles. Often, rakes rip up the topsoil to expose the truffles underneath. Many of the raked fungi are not harvested at peak ripeness, like their European counterparts, where dogs harvest the premium products.

"The sooner PNW truffle harvesters train and use dogs to harvest only ripe truffles, the sooner prices for premium truffles will approach their full potential, but overcoming a reputation for poor quality will take time," the report states.

In fact, the U.S. is one of the few countries in the world where truffles can be

"(Raking) is really bad for the salmon streams, terrible for the forests. You go into an area that's been raked, and it's really just kind of devastating to look at," McGee said.

Truffles can also be farmed — and can be raked there as well. McGee said Lolo is one of the few dogs in the U.S. that can hunt for truffles in the wild and on farms.

"Working on a truffle orchard, where they grow those European species, is much more akin to bomb detection or narcotics detection. It can be very tedious for the dogs, really strenuous. This is super fun for the dogs. So wild hunting they absolutely love. They get to run around and play in the forest and treasure hunt," McGee said.

There was a small truffle harvesting industry in Oregon when McGee got into it, around 13 years ago. But not many people were harvesting truffles in Washington, especially not many people hunting down truffles with dogs.

McGee started training students — human and dog — once she had some truffle experience under her belt. That was about 10 years ago. She also sells truffles to local restaurants, harvesting them day-of and only as many as needed.

"We are only harvesting a small percentage of the truffles that are actually in the ground at any one time. And we're only getting the ones that are ripe," McGee said.

That ripeness means they need to be used quickly.

## Liquid delicacy

A newer venture in Seattle is infusing the herbal liqueur amaro with truffles. Fast Penny Spirits sits on a shipyard in the city's Queen Anne neighborhood. Friends Jamie Hunt and Holly Robinson opened up the distillery during the pandemic, featuring the Italian-style after-dinner drink.

A cozy outdoor tasting area invites guests to sip on different styles of amaro. On a recent afternoon, a couple orders two glasses to sip. Hunt pours a bit of the Americano, a digestif-style drink.

"You'll taste more of the black truffle, chocolate and the spices and earthiness," Hunt said.

In the back of the distillery, tinctures and botanicals line the walls. A dehydrator dries out truffles for future batches while another jar of the black bulbs sits nearby. The liqueurs are made out of local ingredients — from saffron harvested in Chelan County to regional Rainier cherries — and a litany of botanicals.

"We started figuring out the recipe by taking over 100 botanicals and tincturing them in alcohol," Hunt said. "We just did a bunch of micro-trials for the recipe so that we could do dozens a day and then figure out what's working and what's not."

To help find more of the spendy fungi, Hunt is training her dog Fiori to sniff out truffles in Washington state's forests. At first, they played games where Hunt hid the

truffles around her home. Now, Fiori has advanced to start searching the musty forest floor.

"You're out here, and you're trying to communicate and watching their behaviors, and they're watching you. Well, actually, they're not watching you that much," Hunt laughs.

"You'd be surprised. Dogs are really in tune to people's body language," McGee said.

Fast Penny Spirits is able to use the truffles that aren't pretty enough for restaurants, but that are still tasty and shouldn't be wasted.

"To be able to work in sustainability with our production and look at new methods of creating spirits in a sustainable way, I think, is really important," Robinson said.

The market for Northwest truffles is growing. Prices have risen recently, as more dogs begin to harvest fresher fungi. On the low end, McGee estimates Northwest truffles could go for \$400 per pound. The Oregon Truffle Festival says the Oregon fungi is now selling for around \$800 per pound.

Chefs — and distilleries — are starting to lean into the locally-grown delicacies. Forest-to-fork, McGee said. And their uses are innumerable.

She ticks off a list: Infused butter and eggs, pesto, pizzas, pastas, seafood — oysters are her favorite — infused cheeses and nuts, and vanilla ice cream — potentially the first truffle-based food she made.

"Our native black truffles lend themselves really well to dessert-type items," McGee said.

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