

Siuslaw News Coast Life

SENIOR NEWS CALENDAR

INSIDE — 5B



PHOTO BY ERIC LYON

Oregon has prime pickings for several types of truffles — if hunters know where to look. Different varieties are available throughout the year, with both Oregon white and black truffle season ending this month.

A Standard Poodle, a Bloodhound and a Chihuahua walk into a barn — no, this is not the beginning of a bad joke — accompanied by several Lagotto Romagnolos and other assorted breeds. The 20 dogs and their owners were gathered at a farm outside of Eugene on a chilly Saturday in January to test their newly-acquired truffle sniffing skills.

They were finishing up a two-day training session, part of a weekend event called The Oregon Truffle Festival, to see how well they could find the elusive and much prized Oregon white truffle (tuber oregonense).

As early as 1977, renowned Oregon chef James Beard proclaimed Oregon white and black truffles to be the epicurean equal to their exotic and expensive European counterparts that sell for up to \$3,500 per pound.

But 30 years later, Oregon truffles, derided for their lack of aroma and complexity, sell for much less.

Snobbery aside, the lack of acceptance is due in part to a popular Oregon method of harvesting that uses rakes to uncover the shallow truffles.

Unlike European truffle harvesters, who primarily use specially trained dogs, like the Lagotto Romagnolo, to locate only prime, ripe truffles, most Oregon truffle harvesters use rakes that scratch up ripe and unripe truffles indiscriminately.

Only ripe truffles give off the distinctive heady aroma for which connoisseurs and chefs are willing to pay top dollar. Unripe truffles may never mature once collected and is the reason for the Oregon truffles' lack of approval in the international world of truffles.

Ripe truffles are only aromatic when mature and then for only five to 10 days, before degrading.

The aroma is a basic component in truffle reproduction. Spores from male and female truffles must mingle to propagate. Squirrels and other rodents attracted to the scent dig up and eat both male and female truffles and then scatter the blended spores in their scat.

The truffle is the fruit of a subterranean Ascomycete fungus of the genus *Tuber*, that has a symbiotic relationship with one of several varieties of trees. The fungus helps draw water to the

tree's root system, while the tree provides the shade the fungus needs to survive.

In the Pacific Northwest, the fungus is found exclusively around the base of younger Douglas fir trees in elevations usually below 1,500 feet.

According to Charles LeFevre, an OSU-trained mycologist and a founder of the Oregon Truffle Festival, one of the densest populations of edible truffles in the world is located in the Cascade Range foothills between the Willamette Valley and the Pacific Ocean.

Florence has both white and black Oregon truffles buried beneath immature stands of Douglas fir trees in surrounding foothills.

The aromas of Oregon black and white truffles are as distinctively different as chocolate and vanilla. The Oregon white truffle has a pungent, musky, earthy, umami odor. The Oregon black truffle (*leucangia carthusiana*) smells like fresh cut pineapple. Both become instantly unforgettable.

According to Tennessee truffle dog trainer and Lagotto Romagnolo breeder Jim Sanford, Europeans first used female pigs to hunt truffles because the scent of a ripe truffle exactly matched the pheromone characteristics of a male pig in rut.

"The truffle hunters would tie a stout rope around the pig's neck and then have to tug with all their might and reach down and grab the truffle before the 400-pound sow could eat it," Sanford said. "They said you could always tell a truffle hunter because he was missing several fingers."

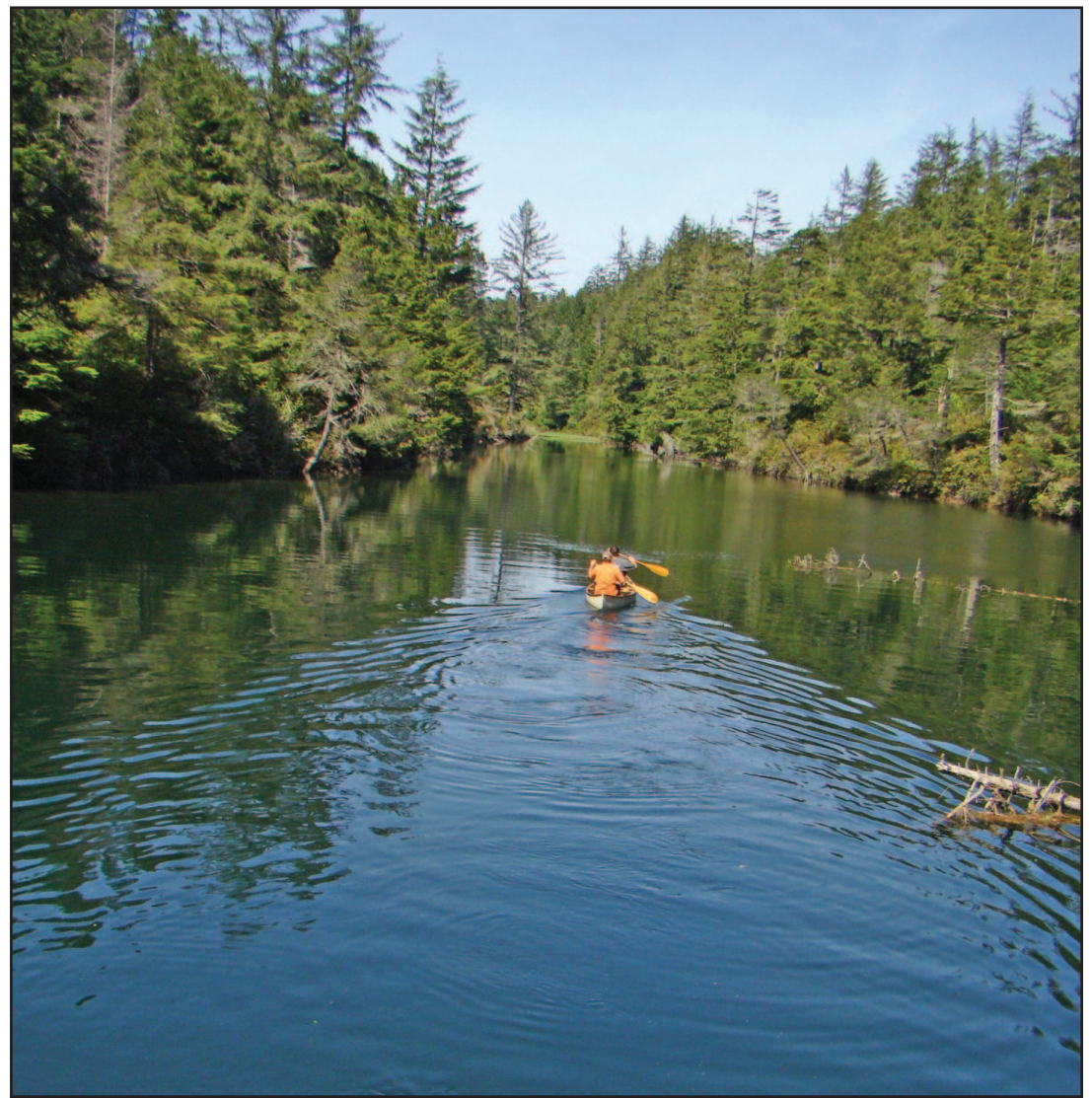
Dogs, on the other hand, don't particularly care for the taste of truffles, don't weigh 400 pounds and aren't sexually aroused by the scent of a ripe truffle.

Very few truffle hunters use pigs anymore.

Prime Oregon white truffles can sell for as much as \$400 per pound and Oregon black truffles go for a bit less. Both are still far below the four-figure price top quality European truffles command.

LeFevre, who also owns a truffle cultivation and inoculation company called New World Trufferies, hopes that through tree inoculation, proper truffle dog harvesting techniques and education, the Oregon truffle industry may

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The Pacific Northwest creates a prime climate for truffles. Oregon black truffles are frequently found along the Oregon coast in stands of immature Douglas fir trees. Using trained dogs is the best way to find these culinary gems. Permits are required, and hunters should make sure they are not harvesting on private or protected land.

one day rival that of Europe — and possibly even equal Oregon's burgeoning wine industry.

Oregon is home to four commercially harvestable truffles, the Oregon white truffle, the Oregon black truffle, the Oregon brown truffle and the white spring truffle.

Oregon's white truffle season is October through March. Black truffle season is December through March. The recently discovered Oregon brown truffle (*Kalapuya brunnea*) season is October through March and the white spring truffle season is May through July. All seasons are weather dependent.

One of the few other commercially harvestable truffles in North America is the Pecan truffle, found in the southeastern U.S.

The Oregon coast is reported to have a higher concentration of black truffles than are found in the Willamette Valley.

The Oregon truffle industry may also be helping the Oregon and Lane County tourist business. Fodor's Travel has identified five trips for adventurous truffle lovers: two in Italy, one in Croatia, one in France and one in Eugene.

Oregon white truffles are shaved onto pasta, creamy soups and other savory dishes that are not overly spicy. The pungent aroma is released when the truffle comes in contact with warm or hot food. The truffle meat actually has very little flavor.

Oregon black truffles go well with sweet and fruity dishes, as well as ice cream, soft cheeses and chicken.

Fresh truffles do not freeze well and are difficult to preserve. But the intriguing fresh truffle olfactory experience may be retained longer by infusing the



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truffles' essence into olive oil or butter that can then be stored in the refrigerator or frozen.

Truffle oil and or truffle butter may be enjoyed on baked potatoes, rice, risotto, and even popcorn. Truffle oil or butter should not be used in cooking, but as a finishing touch or added just before serving.

At the end of the second day, the Lagotto Romagnolos did their owners proud, especially the two puppies that were only five months old. But the dog with the most truffles after the two-and-a-half-hour field exercise was a Golden Retriever who found 50 Oregon white truffles.

The Chihuahua and the Poodle did OK. But the Bloodhound didn't find a single truffle.

Sanford, who taught the two-day exercise said, "I really don't train the dogs. I train the owners."

At least one local eatery, Homegrown Public House and Wildcrafters Deli, offers seasonal truffle recipes. They also hold fieldtrips on foraging for local wild edibles.

For more information, call 541-997-5916.

BLACK
YELLOW
MAGENTA
CYAN