

OBERON

TRUFFLE HUNT

AUSTRALIA IS NOW THE FOURTH HIGHEST PRODUCER OF THE COVETED BLACK PERIGORD TRUFFLE BEHIND FRANCE, SPAIN AND ITALY. WE HEAD TO OBERON TO DIG UP THIS SEASONAL TREAT.

It's about 10am on a Sunday when we pull onto a rough dirt driveway on the outskirts of Oberon, NSW, at the home of Col and Sue Roberts, which is also the headquarters of Lowes Mount Truffiere.

Here, among the highest ridges of the Blue Mountains, about a two-and-a-half hour drive west of Sydney, it's all grey scrub against blue sky. Striding toward us in his mud-caked boots, is chief truffle hunter and co-owner of this two hectare truffiere (truffle farm), Col, who removes his grubby gloves, outstretches a hand and says, "Welcome to Lowes Mount Truffiere."

After a restorative cup of tea, Col introduces the eight truffle hunters on our tour to his labrador, Morris, who leads the way on this chill-blasted morning down the long rows of oak and hazelnut trees in search of the prized black Périgord truffle.

"Success as a truffle hunter is mainly about how you find the truffle and how accurate the dog is. We've been very lucky with Morris because he always finds the truffle straight away," says Col, who pulls up suddenly, sending puffs of dust into the air, as the quiver of Morris's nose hints at the treasure lying beneath the soil.

After letting Morris gently paw the ground near the base of a young hazelnut tree, Col quickly drops to his knees and presses his nose to the earth, as if prostrate in prayer. As the spores of the truffle mature, the aroma becomes stronger, and can be sniffed out by good noses even beneath several inches of soil. We remain silent and somewhat reverential during the spectacle.

Eventually Col teases out a dirt-encrusted truffle from the ground to a chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs". "Good booooy," says Col, rewarding Morris with a few dried liver snacks and an affectionate scratch behind the ears.

As Col runs ahead along the track, keeping pace with Morris, Sue intercepts the tennis ball-sized truffle and invites all of us to inhale its intoxicating aroma.

"It's beautiful, pungent, delicate and earthy. It smells like the forest floor," says French-born Julien Pouteau, the executive sous chef at the InterContinental Sydney. Julien and executive chef Tamas

Pamer sourced about five kilograms of the Lowes Mount Truffiere product for their special tasting menu, *A Taste of Périgord Truffles*, at the hotel's Cafe Opera last year.

"It's the aroma of the truffle that makes it so special. It's a very seasonal product and it's that seasonality that makes the price so high and the product so sought-after," says Julien, accompanied by some of the Cafe Opera team, whom he insists must understand all there is to know about the ingredient and where it comes from.

Col agrees that a big challenge to selling truffles to the Australian

market is educating the consumer. "One of the reasons we invite visitors to be part of a truffle hunt is to demystify the product. We tell them all about the truffle producing process. We show them how the truffle is grown, how it is graded and we let them taste the truffle so they can tell their friends about it and not be afraid to order it in a restaurant," says Col.

Since turning his attention to truffles 12 years ago, Col, a forester by trade, has established some 500 oak and hazelnut trees on the family property. While black Périgord truffles are native to trees found in the woodlands of the Périgord region in France, now, oak and hazelnut trees are inoculated with the spores of the enigmatic *tuber melanosporum* specifically for truffieres. While not all of the inoculated trees have borne

fruit, Sue is confident their small-scale production will continue to grow in step with the increasing interest in the product as well as the farm's active truffle tourism and activities.

"We encourage people to visit and sample a black Périgord truffle plucked straight from the earth in order to appreciate this enigmatic ingredient," says Sue. In addition to conducting the truffle hunts at the farm, Col and Sue sell the prized fruit of the fungi – as well as truffle salt, honey and butter – at farmers' markets and online, and they also host farmhouse lunches throughout the truffle season.



Previous pages, left to right: a black Périgord truffle; Budden's Bed & Breakfast. This page, top to bottom: inside a prized truffle; Col and his dog, Morris, lead a group of truffle hunters.



Col says he will never forget the moment when the family dog unearthed the farm's very first truffle from the roots of its host tree. "It was pretty exciting because we'd never seen one before, let alone tried one. We had the skills, land and climate, and we did all the research to grow the truffles, which we thought were a new and interesting commodity. However, tasting, smelling and marketing truffles were something we were going to address if or when the truffiere ever produced," he explains. "After four years it did, and this started a whole new journey for us, one we are still learning about and enjoying today. To smell a ripe, high-grade truffle was such a great moment: it was the smell of success."

Lowes Mount Truffiere truffle hunts are conducted in small groups during the truffle season of June, July and August. Visit lowesmountruffles.com.au or call (02) 6336 3148 for details.

EVERYBODY'S TRUFFLING

The Périgord truffle, also dubbed the 'black diamond', is one of the most treasured aromatic tubers in the world. Lana Mitchell, from the Australian Truffle Growers Association, estimates that the Australian 2013 season harvested just over eight tonnes of truffles, almost double the previous year's yield.

Although there are now about 200 truffle growers dotted around Australia, not all are producing truffles yet. Lana says that producing a successful harvest isn't as cut and dried as one might imagine. "It can take five to ten years for truffle production to start in a truffle farm, if the conditions are right, and the host trees are inoculated correctly and managed well," she explains.

The first Australian truffle ever sniffed was produced by Périgord Truffles of Tasmania, which harvested its first crop in 1999. In terms of size, Truffle & Wine Co over in Western Australia lays claim to being the largest producing truffiere in the southern hemisphere. Established in 1997, the farm produced its first truffle after six years, and today has more than 13,000 trees. There are a number of other smaller truffle growers located across the country. *For more information on Australian truffles, visit trufflegrowers.com.au.*

THE HIT LIST

STAY

Budden's Bed & Breakfast

This charming guesthouse, in the historic village of Rockley, near Oberon, began life as a bank in 1872. It was also a stop for the coach that carried gold from Burruga to Bathurst. At the heart of the house is a lovely shared living space and dining room. You will leave well rested and well fed. **18 Budden St, Rockley, (02) 6337 9279, buddens.com.au.**

The Dairy

Just a 45-minute drive from Lowes Mount Truffiere is this classic Aussie 'milkhouse' that offers bed and breakfast. Expect rustic furniture, coffee tables piled with cookbooks and thoughtful details, such as fresh flowers and chocolates. Separate to the main house there is also a self-contained two-bedroom cottage. **15 Waterworks Ln, Bathurst, 0412 933 213, milkhouse.com.au.**

EAT

The Hungry Hare

This is farmhouse food at its best. Located within an old rectory, it is generally only open on Saturday nights, where you will sit alongside a happy crowd of locals who appreciate the 'you'll get what you're given because it's great' menu. Bookings are a must. **104 Oberon St, Oberon, 0432 883 150, hungryhare.com.**

Cobblestone Lane

If only the walls could talk in this charming restaurant housed in the old EG Webb & Co department store, built in 1863, at the height of the gold rush. Go for gold and order country-style mains such as the confit duck leg served with porcini mushroom ragù, and the kangaroo tail lasagne with soubise sauce and beetroot pickle. **2/173-179 George St, Bathurst, (02) 6331 2202, thecobblestonelane.com.**