



Precious Peg

WORDS & PHOTOS BY JOHN-PAUL POCHIN

the importance of dogs in the lucrative truffle industry

Much to the frustration of my family, I'm somebody who can rarely walk past a river or stream without wondering whether I can find a few grains of gold hidden in the silt. I don't expect to see any, but I find the thought that there may be hidden treasure quite appealing. However, gram for gram, there is now something potentially more precious than gold to be found buried in the earth here – over the past couple of decades, a small number of people have begun introducing truffles to New Zealand.

Truffles are the fruiting body of a type of underground fungus that grows around the roots of several species of tree including oak, beech, hazelnut and pine. Because truffles grow underground, they can't spread their spores in the wind like mushrooms; instead they rely on animals to dig them up, eat them and scatter them in their dung. To attract these animals, truffles have a very pungent aroma and it's this aroma

that makes them one of the most prized culinary ingredients, especially in France and Italy. The most expensive truffles have fetched thousands of dollars!

Originally pigs were used to hunt for truffles, but they also loved eating them. Dogs are now used as they don't eat the produce. Wanting to learn more about this fascinating subject and the role dogs play, I contacted the New Zealand Truffle Association who put me in touch with Gareth Renowden of Limestone Hills, a vineyard, truffière (truffle plantation), and home to New Zealand's first champion truffle dog – Cordane Precious Peggotty or Peg to her mates. Gareth invited me to visit. It turns out he is a wealth of information on truffles and how to train dogs to find them. He's also written the first book in English to cover the world of truffles – *The Truffle Book*.

Limestone Hills is nestled in the Waipara River gorge. A scenic area just north of Christchurch, it used to be a sheep

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farm until Gareth and his wife, Camille, bought it in 1997 and set about planting truffles, olives and grapes. On the front paddock, before you get to the olive grove, they have a couple of experimental truffle blocks. One has oaks and hazels infected with the Burgundy truffle, and the other has oaks, hazels and a couple of pines inoculated with a white truffle known in Italy as the bianchetto. Beyond the young vineyard, in the back paddock, the oaks and hazels with the Périgord black truffle on their roots are beginning to produce truffles. If all goes well, the Renowdens' truffle season will last six months, starting in autumn with the Burgundy truffle, progressing through winter with the Périgord black, and finishing in late winter with the bianchetto.

On our arrival, we were warmly met by Gareth and Peg, and shown to the beautiful old Shearers Cottage where we would be staying. Overlooking the vineyard and truffière, it's the perfect base for visitors who want to explore the area. It was a stunning evening and we made plans to go hunting with Peg in the morning. Because truffle dogs initially sniff the air to find the area the truffle is in, the best time to go hunting is when the air is still, such as early in the morning. The worst times are when it's windy or raining. After several weeks of warm dry weather, the morning that greeted us was cold, grey and, of course, raining! Not great for finding truffles.

But the dodgy weather did give me the opportunity to talk to Gareth about Peg and all things truffle. Something I really wanted to know was what truffles smell like. Gareth's honest answer was 'old socks'. He then elaborated, offering adjectives such as musty, sweaty and earthy. This was clearly something you have to experience firsthand, but it's no wonder Peg enjoys hunting for them!

Dogs play a major role in the success of a truffle-growing operation – especially when just one missed truffle could mean the loss of hundreds of dollars – and there are ongoing discussions amongst truffle growers about how to select the ideal breed, how to train your dog and even what gender it should be. When it comes to choosing a good truffle dog, Gareth believes that the breed is secondary to having a dog you can work with and one that suits your family and circumstances. He believes it's best to get the puppy as young as possible, preferably at eight to 12 weeks, and possibly one of the opposite sex to you. Another tip is to have a piece of truffle in your pocket when you visit the puppies and choose the one that shows the most interest in it.

Peg comes from a good bloodline, she's a Beagle and some of her relatives work as customs dogs at Auckland International Airport. Gareth believes a key aspect of her training is that they have a close bond – Peg goes everywhere with him. He trained her by hiding treats around the house

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The Périgord black truffle is a powerfully scented fungus that grows underground, it is a very expensive and important delicacy in the finest French and Italian cuisine.

and then gradually increasing the search area until she was able to find baits buried in the truffière.

New Zealand's first truffle dog competitions were held in Napier and then Christchurch. Peg won both competitions, comfortably finding all the truffles in half the time of her nearest competitor. I was in the company of a true champion!

Because it wasn't quite truffle season – June to September in New Zealand – we couldn't go on a real hunt, but when the weather cleared a little Gareth showed me his training methods, using old film canisters containing a small amount of truffle oil. Leaving Peg at home, he set off on his quad bike to hide the canisters around various trees. When he first started training he would walk on foot and couldn't understand how Peg was finding the canisters so quickly until he realised she was following the scent of his feet!

It was time for Peg to do her stuff. Unfortunately, it was the scent of the rabbits she had picked up. Rabbits are a truffière's nightmare since, as well as providing a distraction to the dog, they could easily eat the truffles if they managed to get through the surrounding fence. But soon Peg was on the right track and we were weaving our way up and down rows of trees with Gareth calling 'find it!' at regular intervals. Before long she was clawing at the ground indicating that she'd found the first canister, and the others were located in quick succession. Despite the weather, she clearly had an incredible nose and was worth her weight in gold.

Last season, black truffles were selling in New Zealand for up to NZ\$3750 per kilogram. With the other New Zealand truffle growers, Gareth hopes to establish export markets, shipping our wonderfully aromatic produce to the world's finest restaurants during the Northern Hemisphere summer, when French, Spanish and Italian truffles are out of season. 🐾

truffles

'Truffles are called black gold or diamonds and are the favourite food of gods, kings and pigs. Let's be piggish! Buona Fortuna.' – Antonio Carluccio

The NZ Truffle Association was established in 1991 and there are now more than 100 truffières around the country. Only nine produce commercial quantities and most of this truffle is sold within the country to top restaurants.

It takes between five and 15 years for a tree to start producing truffles. There are several species of truffle, but the Périgord black truffle is the most popular in French cuisine and the main truffle grown in New Zealand.

If you'd like to buy a copy of Gareth's book, request more information on truffles, learn how to train a dog to find them or book the Shearer's Cottage to truffle hunt with Peg, visit www.limestonehills.co.nz

For useful information and contacts from the New Zealand Truffle Association, visit www.southern-truffles.co.nz

