Truffle Basics

PNW Truffles and their Habitat

- We confine our foraging to truffles under Douglas-fir trees. These truffles have evolved a symbiotic relationship with Douglas-fir (mostly in the 15 to 30 year age stands). The trees supply water and sugars to the truffles and the truffles supply the trees with nutrients and water, they "help" each other.

- Truffles are pioneer species, they will colonize "disturbed areas" such as old farmlands, overgrown Douglas-fir Christmas tree plantations, road side ditches and gravel roads, Douglas-fir riparian zones, red alder clear-cuts planted with D-fir, CREP riparian area plantings, thinned stands 30% live crown ratio is great, un-thinned stands are not productive. THINNED STANDS HELP TRUFFLES.

- There are many NW truffles but if you find them associated with Douglas-fir they will generally fall into these categories:

  Black-- (*Leucangium Cascadiense*) Season to harvest is October to May, sometimes as late as June. Black truffles seem to have an association with Sword ferns, although this has not been proven. Black truffles can be found year around although April to May is PEAK season for black truffles. Dark loamy soils are preferred, sandy loams are good, even sands are good habitat.

  White-- (*Tuber Oregonense* and *Tuber Gibbosom*) our Spring and Fall white truffles respectively. Season to harvest is generally January to June for Spring Whites and October through February for Fall Whites. Some years are different, your dog will know when they are ripe! February is PEAK season for whites. Red soils are preferred, clays, heavy clays and silt loams are good habitat.

- Another way to learn when they are ripe is when the Douglas-fir squirrels start harvesting. You will notice small holes about the size of a quarter dollar dug out in the "duff" of the forest floor. Like our dogs they will know when the truffles emit VOC's indicating they are ripe. They will start eating them and sometimes storing them for snacking on later. Many times the dogs have found squirrel "caches" of truffles! Squirrel droppings distribute truffle spores which the truffles are unable to disperse, as they live underground

- Another thing is that dogs mostly only find truffles that are ripe, they skip over the unripe ones which are not yet emitting VOC's.

- Grass fields near Douglas-fir trees many times produce truffles

- Another way to obtain truffles in the PNW is to set prepare and plant a truffle farm of your own, a "truffieres". You can have your land inspected for suitability by a consultant who will advise and assist you in this possible endeavor!

Gear Needed for Harvesting Truffles

- Water for yourself and your dog
- Rain gear, especially pants
- Leash for dog, preferably long
- Harness for the dog
- Towel to dry your wet, cold dog
- High Value treats (dried meat, cheese sticks, your dog's favorite treat)
- Trowel for digging
- Walking stick or cane for walking over rough ground, you will be digging on your knees mostly
- Container or bag for your harvested truffles
- Permission from landowner if you are not harvesting on your own property
- Trained dog (most any kind of dog can be trained, but not all dogs will be good at it)

Dog Training and Working

- Have a consistent training routine. Get your dog used to a harness and leash. Give treats every step of the way, making it a positive experience and Really Fun!
- As a precursor to hunting truffles play hide and seek using dog cookies in a room of the house and then all through the house. Teach the command “find it”.
- Use short training sessions. Using their nose with discipline can be stressful and tiring. Two short sessions a day is better than one long session. Once they understand the task, the time can be extended. Even well-seasoned dogs get tired after 30 minutes or so.
- You can use a “clicker” to mark correct behavior- otherwise an encouraging word is fine. For example, show your dog a truffle, let them sniff then “click” or use marker word “YES” and then give a high value treat.

1. First work in the house. Put a truffle or scented cotton ball on the floor, when the dog indicates or touches it, “click” or say YES and pay (treat). Do several sessions like this.
2. Hide truffle oil scented cotton ball or tea ball with a truffle in it under a chair or rug. Encourage the dog to “Find a Truffle”. When they find it, “CLICK/ AND TREAT”. You’ll be surprised at how fast they locate the treasure!
3. Once you are successful inside and it is repeatable, take the lessons outside. Start out easy and use simple hiding places to encourage success. Gradually increase difficulty over several days. It’s a big jump for some dogs, going from planted “hides” to the real thing. Some dogs are natural and some need a bit more time on the “hiding” step. Remember to consistently pay your dog for working!!
4. The dogs will only find ripe truffles, due to the maturity and off gassing of volatile organic compounds; “VOC’s”.
5. Most truffle oils in the grocery stores have synthetic flavoring and dogs don’t always indicate on it. If you want to use oil, look for bottles with the “botanical” name on it. Only true truffle oils are allowed to use the botanical name.
6. When first working your dog in the field to forage for truffles, it is best to go to a known truffle patch, or to plant some truffles so the dog will succeed. If you are lucky enough to have an experienced dog with you, your dog can watch the working dog from a short distance and the dog will get the idea of “the hunt”.

Cleaning and Infusing

- Cleaning and handling foraged truffles is very important to maintain high quality and flavor. When collecting keep the truffles dry, use a breathable container or an open Ziploc bag with some pieces of paper towels to remove moisture. Keeping the truffles fresh by checking and drying them daily should make them last 3 to 7 days maximum. Blacks will last a little longer. You will know when they are over ripe, they will have a strong unpleasant odor. After cleaning, trim away any bad spots, trim again as needed while infusing.
- Clean them immediately when you get home using a damp sponge, or a very soft child's toothbrush and a little softly running cold water. Dry them, lay out for 10 to 15 minutes, then wrap them individually in pieces of paper towel and place them in a glass container with lid. It is best not to store them, use them right away! Don't waste the VOCs. The white truffles smell 'savory', use them in savory foods. Black truffles smell fruity, apple, pineapple, chocolatey. Use them in sweet dishes.
- We do not usually eat them, we **"infuse"** foods with the flavors. Any foods containing fat (plant or animal) will take up the flavors of the truffle. Examples are: mild cheeses, light olive oils, nuts, potato chips, avocados, butter, cream, milk, mayonnaise, chocolate, 80 proof vodka, sausage snacks, pepperoni and anything else with fats.
- To infuse put one or 2 truffles in a "tea ball" with a string attached so you can hang the tea ball inside the container **above** the food you want to infuse. Then cover the container and check every day until the smell is good. One medium truffle can infuse 2 to 3 pounds of cheese or butter, and can be used more than once with proper care. Never submerse a truffle in a liquid. It is not safe. Truffle(s) should never exceed 10% of the volume of the container you are using; err toward a larger container for best results.
- Every day take the container out of the refrigerator, unwrap the truffle and dry it, then wrap in a new paper towel and trim any soft spots. Truffles should be firm, if they are spongy, they are probably getting over ripe. Over ripe truffles should be returned to the woods to spread spores.

Truffles do not like heat, the VOCs will evaporate and you won't taste them. They do not dehydrate well, you lose the VOCs. It is better to add the flavor after cooking food. Try infused butter on cooked salmon or steak. Try truffle infused olive oil in a salad vinaigrette. Try a little infused olive oil over sautéed vegetables. We love infused pecans with our oatmeal. Experiment and have fun.

Reference: Oregon truffle feasts, by Dawn Meiklejohn. www.trufflefeasts.com