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Dark star: hunting the black truffle

How to take part in a great culinary treasure hunt – and enjoy the fruits of your labour

Each year, as winter settles across southern France, a furtive army of gourmets creeps into the woods in search of the mysterious *Tuber melanosporum*, better known to restaurant-goers as black truffle.

Now is your chance to join them – and take your place in a long gastronomic tradition.

The Romans were firm fans of the richly flavoured fungus, despite their difficulty explaining how it ended up in the soil. Plutarch theorised that lightning was probably responsible. Others credited the gods.

Now, the process is better understood, even if it remains resistant to large-scale commercial production. The best that truffle farmers can do is plant the right kind of oak and hazelnut trees in the right kind of light sandy soil – and then cross their fingers for seven years, hoping the spores will germinate.

Elena Anton-Marty is one of the lucky ones and so, for one day at least, am I.

It's early December, the start of the truffle season, and on a bright, chilly day I've joined Elena and Sammy the truffle dog to grub away under the reliably productive oaks at *Le Mas d'Antonin*, about 15 miles from Beziers.

Sammy, a phlegmatic and shaggy-haired mutt, takes his duties seriously. Not long after he lumbers off through the long grass, he's pawing at the earth and Elena is scrambling to reach him before he devours the buried treasure.

But there's a problem: the truffle is rotten, its flesh soft and sickly. Elena tosses it to Sammy, who gobbles it down.

In theory, dogs aren't natural truffle-lovers and have to be trained to sniff them out. It's one of the reasons they're now favoured over the more traditional wild boar, which can be reluctant to hand over the goods. "Truffle hunters that use pigs don't tend to have all their fingers," reports *Modern Farmer* magazine.

After the first false alarm, successes come thick and fast. Sammy trots from tree to tree, head to the ground, until his nostrils twitch and he starts to dig. Elena pulls him back and beckons me forward to retrieve the truffle. It's stuck fast, and after a little tentative scraping with a knife, I follow Sammy's lead, pawing at the walnut-sized fungus with my hands.

When it finally comes loose, Elena examines it and nods her approval: dark and firm, it's ripe but not too ripe. It would fetch about £30 in the UK – but it's not going to make it that far.

After a few more digs, we retreat to the Seigneurie de Peyrat, a nearby chateau and vineyard, and in its high-ceilinged scullery Elena sets to work scrubbing the soil off the morning's harvest.

The picnic she prepares is, however, defiantly earthy. There's no white linen in this country kitchen, no stuffy waiter – and no limit to the quantity or variety of truffle products that enrich each dish.

Handed a tiny mandolin, I slice fresh truffle onto bread slathered with truffle butter, grilled and then drizzled with truffle oil. Elena sprinkles truffle shavings onto a round of brie, sliced in half and stuffed with truffled creme fraiche – then infuses beaten eggs with grated truffle, scrambles them, and garnishes them with yet more sliced truffle.

The toast was my favourite. Simple yet indulgent, it proved that there's no need to clutter up your cooking with lobster or steak. Black truffle, the dark star of the show, is at its best with bread and butter.

Join the truffle hunt

During the winter season, the [Chateau de la Redorte](#) offers a series of truffle and wine weekends, including an overnight stay in the restored stately home.

The programme begins with a wine tasting in its private cellar on Saturday evening, followed by a truffle-rich tasting menu with paired wines in the chateau's dining room. Breakfast on Sunday morning is followed by a visit to Le Mas d'Antonin for a morning of truffle-hunting, then a workshop on preparing, storing and cooking with truffles – and, naturally, lunch.

The next truffle weekend takes place on 28 and 29 January and costs €235 (£200) per person, including accommodation.

Guests at Chateau de la Redorte can also opt for a half-day truffle-hunting experience, including a truffle tutorial and lunch. Running throughout the truffle season (December to March), the excursion costs €80 (£68) per person.