

EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Prospecting for black gold near Canberra

LINDY ALEXANDER

Centimetres beneath my feet lies a rare and valuable nugget. I know this because my trusty guide, Leroy, has used his years of experience to locate a patch of earth most likely to conceal subterranean treasure. On this frosty morning, Leroy is watching and waiting, impatient for me to start digging.

Trowel in hand, I gingerly scrape back the friable earth. "You'll be able to smell it before you see it," says a voice over my shoulder. And then it hits me – a pungent waft of overripe earth and slight decay. I scratch deeper and deeper until I see a bulbous curve. I wiggle the soil, pluck out the treasure and carefully dust it off. "That's it – you've found a truffle."

I'm only eight minutes by road from Canberra's CBD, but among the neat rows of oaks and hazelnut trees, all signs of city life have faded. Beltana Farm is home to a truffle farm, newly built on-site restaurant and boutique accommodation. Owner Alice O'Mara is taking me on a hunt with Leroy, a hardworking dog that is padding around the orchard, following the shadowy scent to where clusters of truffles bloom just below the surface.

Leroy belongs to Colin Munn, a fellow farmer and truffle-dog trainer from Brae Garden in NSW's Kindervale. He's brought his faithful

11-year-old border collie on the hunt because Alice's Lagotto Romagnolo, Cameo, is out of action with a sore paw. As we wander, Leroy keeps his nose to the ground before sharply backtracking to a slender tree and scratching with his paw at the soil. He sits, waiting for us.

Driving his trowel into the soil, Colin brings a scoop of earth to his nose and inhales deeply. "That's really pungent," he says with glee. "But you can't get too excited because sometimes it's a truffle the size of a pea that's stinking up the soil." After some gentle excavation, Colin reveals a golf ball-sized specimen. He deftly takes a nick out of it with his knife, revealing a tiny galaxy of white webs weaving through a universe of black. "Absolutely perfect," he says.

According to Alice, people who say they don't like truffle have often only tried dishes that use overpowering truffle oil, which usually relies on synthetic scents. "To some people, a fresh truffle can smell like sweaty socks, but once it's grated or sliced, the aroma mellows and you get a deep, rich umami flavour that elevates warm dishes, especially those with eggs and cheese," she says.

For me, the scent isn't so much sweaty socks but heady seafood. "There are so many volatile compounds in truffles that each person picks up on something different," Alice explains. "Some people get hints of asparagus, macadamia, aloe vera or even gasoline."



Colin Munn with Leroy at Beltana Farm near Canberra

PETER REYNOLDS

IN THE KNOW

Private truffle hunts can be organised directly with Alice O'Mara at Beltana Farm.

beltanafarm.au

Mount Majura's truffled brie and wine tasting is available on weekends until August 27; \$35 a person.

mountmajura.com.au/truffle

Rooms at Ovolo Nishi in Canberra from \$239 a night.

ovolohotels.com

Virgin Australia operates daily flights to Canberra from all major cities.

virginaustralia.com/au/en

Whatever the scent is for Leroy, it's clearly intoxicating. While Colin tries to take off Leroy's harness, the truffle dog wants to keep working. Traditionally in Spain and France, pigs were used to sniffle for truffles, but Colin says dogs are a safer bet – "unless you want to lose a finger trying to hook a truffle out of a pig's mouth".

Growing truffles relies on good soil, the right type of trees (oak, hazelnut or pine) and a well-trained pooch. "Training isn't complicated and generally the best animals are those that are referred to in the industry as slightly naughty dogs," says Colin. "You know, the ones that eat your sprinklers and love to dig holes?" I nod, thinking of my two-year-old furry friend at home. "They're the ones that make great truffle dogs because you can channel their energy into being productive."

We follow Colin and Leroy as they fossick for more underground treasure. Beltana has more than 800 trees, planted by Alice and her husband, Doug, 10 years ago. Each tree came inoculated with truffle spore, although Alice says only about 30 per cent of the trees currently produce the prized fungi, and it wasn't until the eighth year that their harvest reached a commercial quantity.

Last year, the farm harvested 40-50kg and, in theory, harvests should double each year. "We're digging up around two kilos a week at the moment, but we don't have a running tally of the total," Alice says. "It'll be a surprise for the end of the season." While truffle prices can be eye-wateringly high (they currently sit at \$2500-\$3000 a kg or \$2.50-\$3 a gram), a little goes a long way. "You can definitely experience the beauty of eating truffle without spending \$200 on a dish," she says.

A few hours later at Monster Kitchen and Bar, on the ground floor of the hip Ovolo Nishi hotel, I experience the transformative effect that a shaving of truffle can have. The plant-based menu lends itself perfectly to its aromatic notes. Thin ribbons of truffle are scattered on top of spinach gnudi with brown

butter, sage and pine nuts. Thankfully, there's no hint of sweaty socks, seafood or gasoline. It is some of the best vegetarian food I've had.

Next morning, I head to Mount Majura Vineyard to taste a flight of wines. The neighbouring farm has delivered a batch of

truffles and a seam has been placed through creamy brie.

It's a combination that works particularly well with the 2010 Silurian Late Disgorged, a toasty sparkling wine with notes of caramel and sweet brioche.

I wonder if my home in central Victoria would offer the right climate for a truffle farm. I don't have land or trees inoculated with the fungi, but I do have a slightly naughty canine that, with a bit of training, could be a good truffle hunter. If only he'd stop eating our sprinklers.

Lindy Alexander was a guest of Ovolo Nishi and Virgin Australia.

MORE TO THE STORY

Truffle hunts are on offer across the country, including at Australia's first producing property, The Truffle Farm, at Deloraine, Tasmania (December to September). Central Victoria is home to Black Cat Truffles, which runs summer and winter hunts. In Western Australia, hunts are on offer at the Manjimup orchard of the Booth family. thetrufflefarm.rezdy.com blackcattruffles.au australiantruffletraders.com

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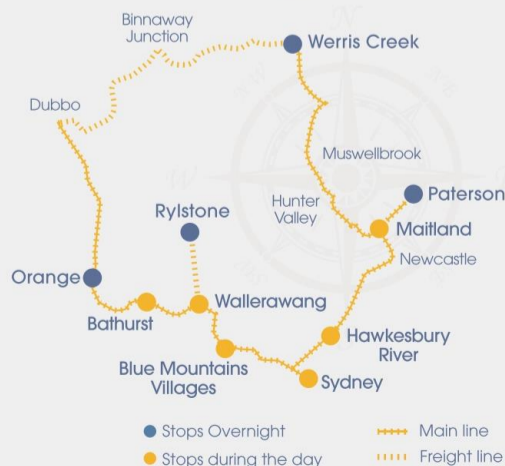
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