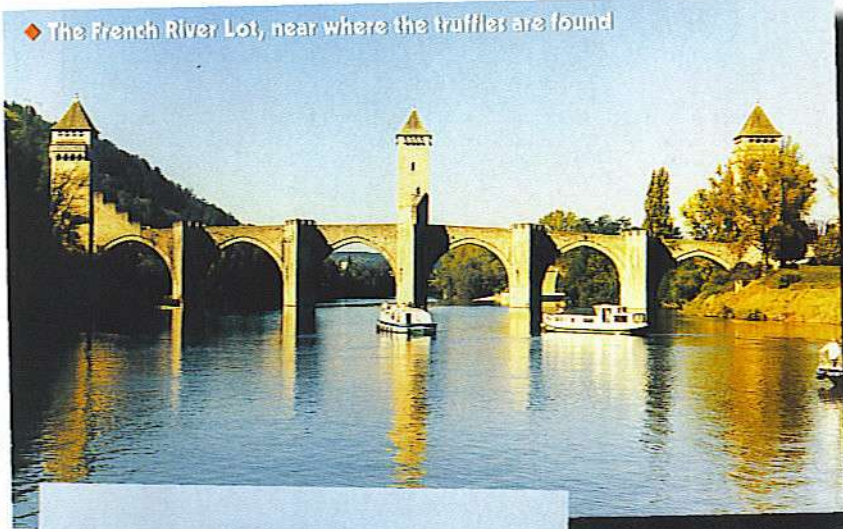


# Cherche la Truffe

◆ The French River Lot, near where the truffles are found



## Truffe

At £300 per kilo, it would be nice to dig up truffles in the back garden. Well, maybe if your garden is in France and you have a pet Labrador. Easy, explains Richard Hill

**T**ruffles are far from pretty to look at but, oh! that flavour! The truffle is justifiably one of the most expensive foods in the world, it is difficult to find, both in the shops and in the wild. Most often, truffles are found buried deep under oak forests in France. Traditionally, pigs were used to hunt the truffle at harvest time. But at an experimental truffle farm in the Lot region of France, the delicate task is being handled by Labradors.

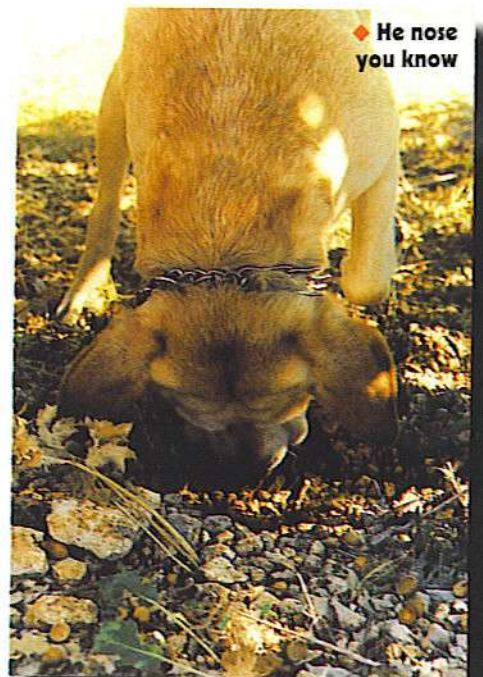
### FUNGUS

Truffles are a fungi, found usually on the roots of infected oak or hazel trees, where the soil is limestone rich and the weather Mediterranean. Pigs have been used to hunt for truffles for centuries because these have the same musky smell as the sexual odour of the wild boar. But here lies the problem. Although highly efficient at finding truffles, which lie just beneath the surface, the pig was also inclined to eat the nuggets of "black gold". With a price tag as high as £300, it's a bit high on the luxury list to be given to the pigs. So what to do?

### TRUST A DOG

Nowadays dogs are being trained to look for truffles. They need slightly more encouragement, but at least don't go into a sexual frenzy when they find one.

At the Station d'Experimentation sur la Truffe, The Truffle Research Station, at Le Monat near Cahors, Pierre Sourzat works with his trained Labradors, four-year-old Indiana, and nine-year-old Darius. Pierre is a nationally recognised authority on truffle farming.



◆ He nose you know



◆ A traditional area, this is the "hanging tower"



◆ Indiana has found something



◆ Pierre helps out with the digging

At the Truffle Research Station, they are experimenting with the cultivation of trees that are deliberately “infected” with the truffle spores. There are over 200 trees, oak and hazel. It is not just a matter of letting the dog roam free and then spotting where he digs, which is fortunate. You can take a lot of the guesswork out of the process by spotting where there is no grass or vegetation around the trees. Antibiotics within the truffle kill the grass above. On this site, not large, it only measures about two and half acres, Indiana and Darius are kept busy locating the delicacies lying just beneath the surface. Most of the growing is done during the harvest season, which runs from November to March.

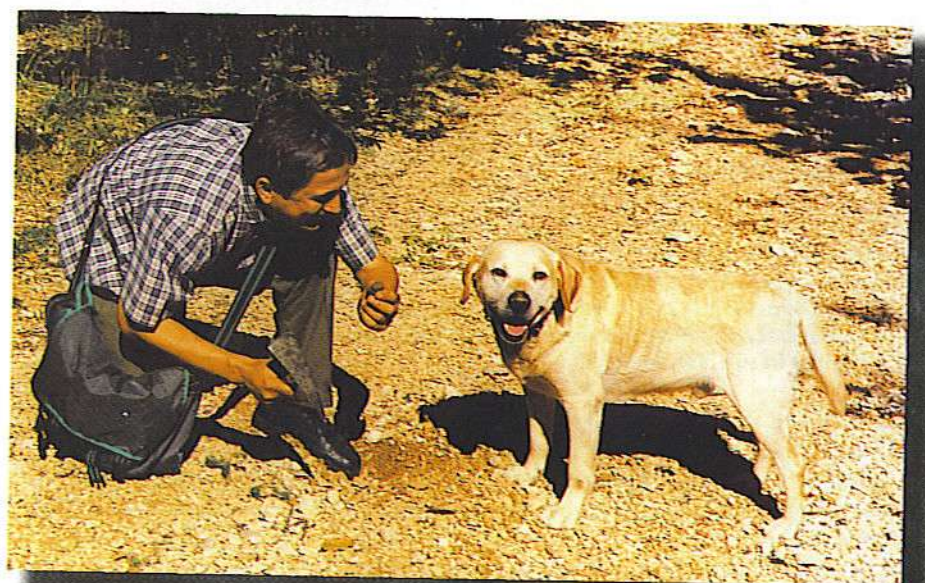
**SNUFFLING TRUFFLES**

So how do you encourage the dogs to find the truffles in the first place? And how do you ensure that the dogs do not copy the pigs of yore and eat their prize when they find it? Indiana and Darius were both trained in similar ways. Initially, a pungent variety of cheese is buried in the ground. The dogs are encouraged to search for the cheese and rewarded with more cheese if they are successful. Over a period of time, truffle is added to the buried cheese, the reward is still just piece of cheese, not truffles. Eventually, the dogs can sniff out pure truffle, which earns them a bit of cheese from Pierre for each truffle found.

Pierre explained that not every dog can be trained, and some, like Darius learn quickly, in just two weeks. Others, Indiana included, take months to train. Neither will they work together. Jealousy and aggression creep in when both are trying to work the same patch.



◆ Cheese is the reward for a job well done



◆ Didn't we do well? says Pierre

**TO MARKET**

Nearby, at Lalbenque, the truffles are sold in a market, unique to both the region and the product. Every Tuesday, buyers and vendors gather to trade truffles. The truffles are carefully examined, but none can be sold until 2.30 pm when the trading bell sounds. Deals are conducted in secret, prices negotiated on paper, eavesdroppers excluded. A deal is struck if the buyer accepts the paper on which the price is written.

**UNIQUE FLAVOUR**

Truffles have a unique flavour and aroma which is notoriously hard to describe. They are used extensively to flavour French food, which, in turn, makes French food so instantly recognisable. Truffles can be grated into omelettes, although true connoisseurs insist that the truffle should be stored in the egg basket for at least two days before being cooked. In poultry dishes, slices of truffle are placed under the skin of the bird before cooking.

Indiana and Darius go on truffle hunting. They have plenty of work to do. The Lot valley produces 10 tonnes of truffles every year. So the dogs can look forward to a plentiful supply of rewarding cheese for some time to come.

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 The author would like to thank Natasha Edwards for kindly interpreting dialogue with Monseur Pierre Sourzat