

MUSHROOM NEWSLETTER

6 November 2017

People often think of mushrooms as an autumn crop, but in reality there is always something out there if you know where to look. Truffles are a case in point. These grow underground and can be found at any time of year. My current interest in this elusive prize was piqued by a recent article in *The Guardian* about the 'cultivation' of a black truffle in Wales

(<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/nov/06/joining-in-the-fungi-black-truffle-grown-in-uk-for-first-time>). The gist of the article is that this is evidence of global warming, but of course to me it ignores a much more interesting range of ideas. So this seems the perfect excuse for a newsletter – not least because Britain's native truffle, the summer truffle (*Tuber aestivum*), defies its common name by fruiting throughout the winter. Indeed, it is easiest to find in the colder months thanks to the lack of undergrowth in its woodland habitats.



Truffles are a highly-prized, but much misunderstood mushroom

These subterranean gems are associated with hot regions – most famously Perigord, Alba and northern Italy – but to the surprise of many they are also found in Britain truffles do certainly grow here, although they are rarely found. In *Food for Free*

Richard Mabey describes Britain's last professional truffle hunter, Alfred Collins, patrolling Wiltshire's leafy lanes by bike, accompanied by two terriers. These would take it in turn to ride on the handlebars while the other ran alongside. Apparently he would collect up to 25lbs of tubers a day, but when he retired in 1930 there was no one to take his place. As a result the locations of his best spots were lost and within a few years truffle finds anywhere in Britain were rare. It was assumed this was just another casualty of the changing countryside use: a fungal corncrake or nightingale.

Then, in 2004, a Wiltshire farmer found an oddly-shaped nodule on a woodland path. At first glance he thought it was a clod of earth or a deer dropping, but he looked closer and something stirred in the inner recesses of his memory. He took it home to check first with a book and then with a mycologist. Sure enough it was a truffle. The next year he found more and yields continued to increase. Now the wood is yielding around 75 kilograms of these pungent subterranean mushrooms annually with one monster weighing in at 600g. In the absence of a dog, the landowner and an exclusive group of friends find these by sliding their bare feet through the woodland floor, probing for a tell-tale lump or even the protruding skin of the gnarled black tubers.

There is more than an element of mystery about this particular hotspot. Collins found his truffles in the numerous scraps of old deciduous woodland spread across Salisbury Plain. The new wood was planted as recently as 1990, however, and contains a mixture of beech, hazel, cherry, ash, field maple and spindle. No one knows why or how the truffles arrived. One theory is that they came in on the roots of the saplings which could well have been imported from the Continent. If so, this is impossible to verify because the landowner who established the plantation has since died, taking with him all records of where he bought the stock. Another theory is that they hitched a lift in the guts of imported Limousin cattle which grazed the area in the 1970s. It seems more likely that they arrived from a relatively local source in the digestive tracts of wild animals such as deer. After all, if they were available to Collins in the 1920s, a subterranean woodland mushroom is unlikely to have disappeared completely.



As a result, experts now suspect that this, the summer truffle (*Tuber aestivum*), is actually relatively common in beech, chestnut and oak woods on chalky soils across the country. The problem, of course, is that even the most skilled mycologist finds it difficult to locate this wonderful mushroom. The usual tools of microscope and DNA analysis are all very well when it comes to differentiating between the countless species of Russulas, for example, but the fruiting bodies of these are visible and therefore relatively easy to locate. Whether expert, professional hunter or keen amateur, to find truffles you really need a trained dog.



To find truffles one really needs a dog – Albert Collins used Jack Russells

In the past pigs were used, but originally this was fortuitous. They were there foraging in the woods which were otherwise wasted agriculturally and instinctively make a bee-line for the fungi, driven on by the mushroom's pheromone-mimicking scent. The same chemical probably accounts for some of its appeal to humans. It has long had a reputation as an aphrodisiac and the mediaeval Church distrusted it as a food which leads to lust.

But back to the pigs: until the Industrial Revolution, forests across Europe were exploited in one of the most primitive of farming methods: 'pannage'. Village sows were mated early in the New Year. Their piglets were born in the safety of sties at Easter, but then driven out into the woods in early summer. For the next few months they would feed on the woodland undergrowth before fattening on the glut of acorns and beech mast in autumn. To protect the sows and piglets from predators such as wolves, the swine would be accompanied by a boy whose job entailed little more than keeping an eye on his herd. As a result, if the swineherd was quick when he spotted an excited sow snuffling in the leaf mould, he could step in before the mushroom disappeared down her gullet and save a choice morsel for the pot.

Now if any of you have ever owned pigs – and I have – then you will know that pushing a mature sow away from a choice tit-bit is not just tricky, but challenges the basic laws of physics. My Tamworth sows, Apple and Sauce, were not large by pig standards, but each had the shoving potential of the Pontypridd front row. Until relatively recently, the loss of a fair proportion of truffles didn't really matter. Thanks to the Church's suspicion, and in common with other wild foods such as oysters and salmon, they were generally classified as 'peasant food'.



Pigs at pannage would follow their ancestors' natural instincts

About 200 years ago as gastronomy began to take off and improved transport gave access to distant markets, truffles began to acquire a real value. This meant the inevitable fungal losses to the pig were suddenly too costly to be borne and it was worth training dogs instead. These have no trouble finding the pungent haul, but are motivated by the desire to please their owner, not by greed for the buried jewel. Thus nowadays almost all truffles are found with dogs: so take those Dordogne postcards of a pig and a French peasant (complete with beret) with a very large pinch of salt. Along with the picture of a toothless peasant woman in local costume pouring grain down a copper funnel into a goose's gizzard, the scene has clearly been staged.

When it comes to dogs, the traditional breed – in Italy at least – is supposedly the Lagotto Romagnolo, a sort of wiry-haired retriever from the north-east of the peninsula. Actually any dog could doubtless be trained to find these smelly growths, but judging from other postcards, keen-nosed game dog breeds such as pointers tend to be used in France. There are persistent rumours that truffle hunters in Italy regularly descend into bitter turf wars. Supposedly these feuds can even involve laying poisoned baits to kill a rival's dogs, but I can find no credible evidence that this has actually happened.



Lagotto is the traditional truffle hound – but any breed could be trained to find this pungent mushroom

All hope is not lost for the British mycophile. Following the Wiltshire find, scores more mushrooms have cropped up each year. Summer truffles have symbiotic relationships with trees – usually beech, chestnut or oak – and prefer alkaline, poor, soils. They grow just beneath the surface alongside the roots, sometimes breaking the surface, but more often revealing themselves as a small lump.

By the way, this is a great example of why it is positively beneficial to hunt and eat wild mushrooms. As subterranean fungi, they positively depend on being eaten to disseminate their spores. This explains, no doubt, the incredibly pungent odour which, in the case of the Alba variety, can permeate through up to 60 cm of soil to attract the attention of deer, boar and, of course, a hunter's Lagotto Romagnolo.

But just for a moment we should return to the recent 'cultivated' Perigord truffle near Monmouth. Actually, I don't believe you can really call this cultivation. This implies

the farmer is in control of the process, but at least until very recently the truffier did little more than create the best conditions possible for the mushrooms. In essence he simply picked a suitable patch of limestone or chalky ground, rubbed a sapling's roots with a truffle and hoped enough spores would transfer to form hyphae. He then planted the seedling and forgot about it for a decade.

Sometimes nothing happened, sometimes he was lucky – but even when everything went well, yields would vary wildly from year to year. Thanks to the weather, no farmer has complete control of the harvest and yields of every crop vary, but all the same a truffier has no control at all, so it isn't farming - 'ranching' would be more accurate.

Things might be changing, however. Paul Thomas (who features in *The Guardian* article) is a mycologist who teams up with farmers across Britain to establish truffle plantations. He claims to bring a new level of science to the field (well woods to be precise). His saplings are reared and inoculated with truffle spores in a sterile lab. Once he is sure the mycelia have taken, the trees are hardened off and planted out. Also – and this is critical – he manages the pH of the soil in the plantation. Without this last element there could have been no Monmouthshire black truffle.



Truffle plantations?

But to round everything up, if anyone is really interested in finding truffles closer to home, they would do well to contact a friend of mine, Melissa Waddington, who runs hunts in south east England. Critical to her success is that she has trained two cocker spaniels (she also runs dog training courses for aspiring truffle hunters). See <https://truffleandmushroomhunter.com/>

This could make a good Christmas present – as well, of course, as buying your loved one a foray with me in the wilds of Wales. If anyone is interested in this, I can send a voucher and field guide now so you have something to hand over on 25 December and we can set the precise date of their trip to Wales at some point in the New Year.

Happy hunting!

Daniel Butler

www.fungiforays.co.uk

01597 811168 / 0779 429 4221

P.S. As always, let me know if you want to be removed from the list and I will do it forthwith.