

## Report from the Truffle Festivals in the United States by Alana McGee

Many have heard of the famous Alba Truffle festival held in September of every year in the hills and market towns of northern Italy. What you may not know is there are actually 3 truffle festivals or gatherings in the United States!

This year marked the 5<sup>th</sup> annual Napa Truffle Festival, the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Oregon Truffle Festival, and introducing the 1<sup>st</sup> (although there have been others in this area in the past) Asheville Truffle Experience!

These festivals take place during the peak of truffle production in the United States, which is in January & February. All three festivals highlight the exquisite & ethereal nature of truffles by bringing in world-renowned chefs to oooh and ahhh guests with their culinary creations. All three truffle festivals also have a scientific component and bring in scientists and truffle consultants from all over the globe as well as regional experts.

In chronological order the Napa Truffle Festival is first. This year (2015) it was held Jan 16<sup>th</sup> – Jan 19<sup>th</sup> in, as the name suggests, in Napa, California. In addition to long time host chef and amazing culinary talent (and the only US chef to ever be invited to the Alba truffle festival) Chef Ken Frank of La Toque welcomed Michelin star chefs: Chef Riccardo Agostini from *Ristoranti il Piastrino* in Pennabilli Rimini, Italy, Chef Roberto Donna of *Al Dente Ristorante* in Washington, DC and Chef Tony Esnault of *Church & State* in Los Angeles.

The weekend started off with scientific forums on aspects related to truffle cultivation with Dr. Paul Thomas of Mycorrhizal System in the UK, and myself covering topics on the science of canine olfaction and practical application transitioning dogs to working on orchards for commercial harvests of cultivated species. The following day was more culinary centric with well, what does one do in Napa during a truffle festival, visit wineries of course!

There were opulent Truffle lunches at participating wineries, followed by a truffle hunting demonstration at Sinskey Vineyards on their Perigord & Burgundy Truffle orchard. There were 3 Lagotti in attendance providing the demonstration as part of the festival, Alana McGee & Lolo, Staci O'toole with Mila, and Bill Collins & Rico. Of course everyone loves following the dogs, and it was a great time. You can't quite beat hunting truffles with a glass of wine in hand. The night ended with the centerpiece of the festival, the Dinner at La Toque.

The Sunday of the festival kicked off with a wild mushroom forage in the hills above Napa where some great edible species, such as Matsutake, were found. Lolo even found one wild native truffle, a small fruity species later identified as *Balsamia magnata*. The following day there was a truffle marketplace at the Oxbow in Napa with different vendors creating such wonderful dishes as truffle pizza and even truffle cocktails!

The Oregon Truffle this year celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and celebrated this by expanding the festival into the Portland area and adding a Truffle hunting competition for amateur hunters to get out in the woods, compete, and show their stuff! The event spanned several weeks.

The weekend in Portland was a very rain drenched affair (as one expects in the Pacific Northwest in the winter), but was filled with all kinds of fabulous activities and culinary marvels, too many to name each individually! Thursday & Friday guests chose from a variety of experiences including private dining showcasing native Oregon truffles at Portland area Restaurants such as *Elder Hall* with Chef Jason French, and *Irving Street Kitchen* with Chef Sarah Shafer and a "Walk on the Wild Side" with a sampling and showcasing the talent from many of the areas chefs including samples of *Salt & Straw's* famous truffle ice cream!

Saturday & Sunday Continued with "Foraging & Feasting" where guests were lead on a truffle hunt in the woods followed by lunch at one of three of the Willamette valley's celebrated wineries or another great experience "Better Together" which paired Oregon truffles with Oregon's famous Pinot Noir. Sunday also included the truffle marketplace in Newberg where the public could come and sample

various truffle related products, and take home some truffles themselves as well as wine taste their way around the state all in one setting.

The follow week was the inaugural Joriad Truffle hunting competition which pitted amateur handlers against the clock to find truffles in a staged arena and then finalists (\*we won't go into too much detail here because we know other members want to share their experiences!) were taken to a secret location deep in the Willamette valley and put to test of finding real truffles!

The Lagotto community had a strong representation, and took home 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, & 4<sup>th</sup> places! It was a fabulous event that was followed by an award dinner, and all had a great time and made new friends!

The following weekend took place in Eugene, Oregon. The festival has grown quite big over the years and this year did not disappoint. This included the scientific growers' forum where prospective orchard owners, and those waiting for their first crop of European truffles to mature, listened to scientists, orchardists, and orchard owners from all over the world including as far away as Italy and Australia. Including scientists such as Dr. Shannon Berch from B.C. Canada, Dr. Matt Smith of Florida, one of the leading authorities on Pecan Truffles, and Nigel Wood the founder of the Melbourne Truffle Festival in Melbourne Australia.

The weekend also included cooking classes, and the always sold out Truffle Dog Training Seminar lead by Jim Sanford of Blackberry Farms and Deb Walker of k-9 Behavior Company. Teams who participated in the training seminar learned how to identify odor and then on the second day got to go out into the field and try their hand at the real thing! Happy to say most dogs found a truffle the 2<sup>nd</sup> day out in the woods!

The weekend also included gourmet dinners at private villas in Oregon wine country as well as a host of other culinary events, and even more truffle hunts in the woods with many volunteers pitching in to make the event a great success. Such as Mike Madrid who lead one of the foraging trips into the woods with his Lagotto.

The culmination of the weekend's events was the Grand Truffle Dinner. This dinner highlighted native Oregon winter white & black truffles in the hands of 6 award winning chefs. Each of these courses was of course, also paired with amazing Oregon Wine.

On Sunday the public was also welcomed to the Truffle marketplace, where once again everyone could see, taste, and smell all the best that the truffle world has to offer in the United States.

As this issue is going to print the Asheville Truffle Experience is yet to come, held Feb 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> in Asheville North Carolina. This 3-day truffle extravaganza includes scientific talks by truffle experts Pierre Sourzat from France and Dr. Jim Trappe from Oregon as well culinary demonstrations and a star studded wine-paired truffle dinner with Chef William Dissen highlighting the black winter truffle aka the Perigord truffle which is grown locally in North Carolina! All of this is then followed up by a visit to the Mountain Research Station Truffle Orchard and a truffle dog demonstration with Lois Martin of Truffle Dog Company and her Lagotto Monza. On Saturday there also will be a market place open to the public in *The Cellar at Isa's Bistro* in downtown Asheville filled with truffle goodness and you will be able to take home your very own black diamonds of the kitchen!