

Trained truffle dogs sniff out the goods

Robert Sinskey Vineyards is experimenting with growing cash crop

KEVIN COURTNEY | Jan 20, 2014



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Bill Collins of Point Richmond and his dog Rico get ready to hunt for truffles in Robert Sinskey's Carneros vineyard and truffle orchard as part of the Napa Valley Truffle Festival's dog hunting demonstration on Saturday afternoon. Rico is a Lagotto Romagnolo, an Italian breed of dog bred for truffle hunting, and is fully trained and experienced in finding truffles. Festival participants watched as dog trainer Alana McGee, founder of Truffle Dog Company in Oregon, worked with dogs and their owners to first imprint the scent of the truffle on the dogs, and then go out into the orchard to find truffles placed in boxes with air holes to release the scent.

Photo: Lisa James/Register

If this were Arkansas, these working dogs would be focused on retrieving ducks for their hunter owners.

But this is the Napa Valley. The working dogs at Robert Sinskey Vineyards in Carneros on Saturday morning were in search of the most prized European truffles.

Dogs and their owners prowled between rows of young, willowy filbert trees whose roots had been inoculated some three years ago with truffle spores.

Sinskey and a handful of others in Napa Valley are experimenting with growing truffles, a cash crop potentially even more lucrative than the wine grape, said Robert Chang of the American Truffle Co.

The crowd watching the truffle dogs sniff along the tree rows were attendees at the Napa Truffle Festival, a four-day event that attracted some 350 people to workshops and elegant meals. On Monday, a potpourri of tastings was open to the community at the Oxbow Public Market.

Several of the truffle dogs were real pros, having been trained to sniff out the black balls of fungus that typically hide a quarter inch to two inches below ground. Historically, pigs did this work. They found the scent sexy.

Pigs also found truffles tasty, which is why truffle hunters have shifted to trained dogs who are happy to be rewarded with other treats.

One of the dogs with the sharpest truffle noses on Saturday was Rico, who belonged to Bill Collins of Point Richmond. Rico is a fuzzy-haired Lagotto Romagnolo, an Italian breed known for its sniffer.

Because newly inoculated trees, such as those at Sinskey, take five to six years until their first harvest, Saturday's dog demonstration used a fresh black truffle flown over from Europe, said Chang, partner and managing director of the American Truffle Co., which organized the Napa Truffle Festival.

The dogs were allowed to inhale the scent of the imported truffle, then shavings were placed in a tea ball, which was hidden in Sinskey's acre of inoculated filberts and English oaks.