

AGRICULTURE

B.C.'s first Périgord truffle no trifle

Prized culinary delicacy unearthed on Abbotsford farm can fetch \$2,200 a kilo

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VANCOUVER SUN

Abbotsford farmer Bill Stewart has produced B.C.'s first Périgord truffle, a culinary delicacy that fetches up to \$2,200 a kilo wholesale.

The near-golf-ball sized fungus was unearthed by a truffle-sniffing dog in a seven-acre stand of specially inoculated hazelnut trees that Stewart planted nine years ago. Two more truffles have been unearthed since.

"People thought we were crazy, but now it's like finding gold," said Stewart. "It's just a few flakes (of gold) for now, but it's looking very good."

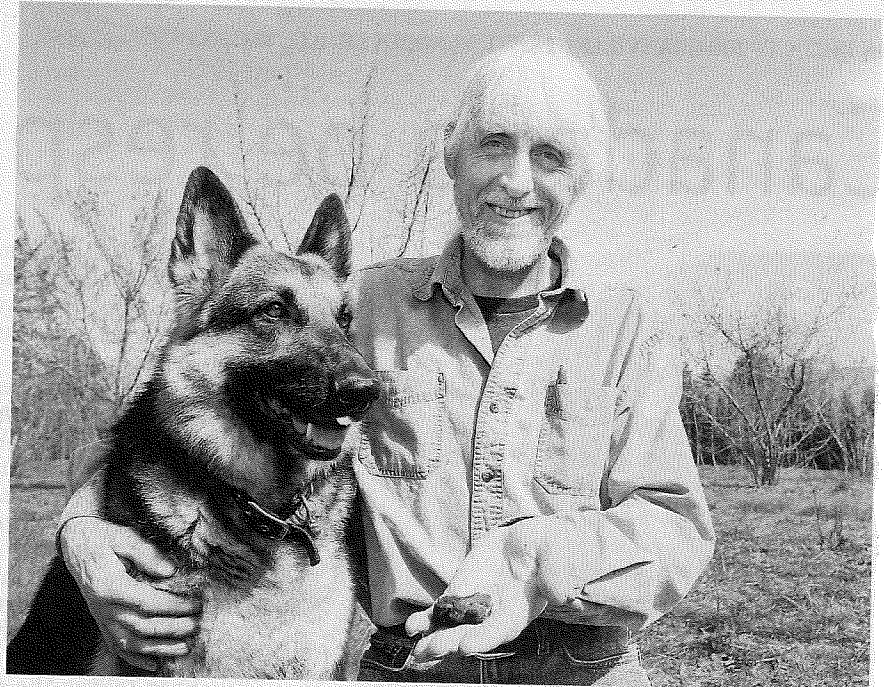
DNA analysis conducted by University of B.C. biologist Shannon Berch confirmed that the fungus is a *Tuber melanosporum*, or French Périgord black truffle. DNA testing is the only way to be sure that a truffle is the sought-after French variety, according to truffle farmer John Neudorf, president of the Truffle Association of British Columbia.

Native white and black truffles, Chinese truffles and European winter truffles are used by chefs, but cost far less than the pungent Périgord. And Wild Italian truffles can be far more costly, at more than \$7,000 per kilo retail.

Although cultivated truffle farms can take up to 15 years to mature, a productive orchard can generate about \$100,000 per acre, Neudorf said. A single intact Périgord truffle of the size found at Stewart's farm is worth about \$50.

"I'm still in shock really," said Stewart.

The first specimen was found by Duff, a six-year-old retriever cross trained by Alana McGee, owner of Toil and Truffle, a Washington-based



KIM STALLKNECHT/PNG

Bill Stewart, shown with his dog Eva, holds a truffle found on his Abbotsford hazelnut farm by a trained dog brought in from Washington state. Eva is still learning to sniff out truffles.

truffle-harvesting and dog-training firm.

McGee was only on the farm a few minutes when Duff signalled a find in the third row of trees. McGee cleared away the soil with a spade and revealed a black truffle.

"It was the most amazing feeling, really exciting," said McGee.

The second and third truffles were located in the same orchard by Lolo, McGee's 10-month-old Lagotto Romagnolo, a breed traditionally used by truffle hunters in Italy.

Stewart's dog Eva is still in training.

"She can find truffles if I hide them around, but she has other interests," said Stewart, who runs the farm his

family founded in the 1930s with his wife Kathi.

This month's tiny harvest has been a long time coming. Stewart began sprouting hazelnuts to grow 600 trees in 2003, working with Oregon-based grower Charles LeFevre to inoculate the roots with truffle spores before planting. Stewart's farm is the largest of six cultivating French black truffles in B.C. — four in the Fraser Valley and two on Vancouver Island — and the first to produce a confirmed Périgord. A farm near Carvallis, Ore., also inoculated by LeFevre, unearthed its first Périgord truffle last month.

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