



Searching for black gold

Red Hill's nutrient-rich soil fosters countless culinary delicacies, but this might be the richest of them all. Cassy Polimeni gets down and dirty on a truffle hunt

Dappled light dances across the black top as I round the bend towards Red Hill Truffles. The entrance is deliberately non-descript – all the better to throw off would-be truffle thieves – and I almost miss it. I'm here to meet one of Victoria's first truffle farmers. A social worker for more than 30 years, Jenny McAuley decided to try her hand at growing truffles after inheriting her grandparents' farm, which has been in her family since the 1860s. She greets me at the entrance along with MP Experience co-founder Danielle Field, whose company co-ordinates a range of tours across Mornington Peninsula, including intimate truffle hunts and tastings.

"I'm glad we've got a bit of a chill, I thought it was going to be too warm for truffles!" Danielle says. Truffles need a cool climate and a number of frosts in order to ripen. Jenny decided to try her luck in Red Hill after a trip to Tuscany in 2003 where she became acquainted with black (or Pèrigord)

truffle. She remembered an abundance of wild fungus on the farm when she played here as a child and thought it could be fertile territory for a truffière. She was told it would never work because Red Hill is too warm, but her instincts proved correct.

"We're 800 feet above sea level so it's always 2-3C cooler in Red Hill than on the coast; it's a microclimate," Jenny says. "Plus we've got plenty of water and good soil elements, which made me think I could give it a go here."

I swap my sneakers for gumboots and we head towards the building that overlooks the truffière. Jenny has transformed a former hayshed as a beautiful tasting room for post-hunt feasts, complete with reclaimed timber and eclectic stained-glass windows salvaged from antique shops. A doe-eyed Springer Spaniel is sprawled by an open fire and leaps up to greet us.

"This is my truffle dog, Thomas," Jenny says affectionately. "In social work terms he has an

attachment disorder from being abandoned – he's very attached to me."

Thomas was rescued from a Hobart pound and trained for 10 months before being brought to Red Hill to assist Jenny with the truffle harvest. It's his nose we'll be relying on today.

The truffière is made up of row upon row of hazelnut trees, which Jenny purchased pre-inoculated with truffle spores. The first group of trees was planted in 2005, with the first truffle harvested five years later, in 2010.

Their growing cycle runs from December until the end of April, at which point they stop growing and begin to ripen. During this stage Jenny is careful to cover any emerging truffles with soil to prevent them rotting or being eaten by worms.

Thomas has been trained to drop to the ground when he smells truffle, and rest his head on his paws. When he does this, Jenny kneels beside him to dig in the space between his paws, at which point he jumps up for a treat. Jenny turns the soil over and over to no avail. It's difficult to tell if Thomas is smelling old truffles, keen to please, or just keen for a treat. We plough on.

"Part of what we try to do on these tours is encourage people to cook with truffle," Jenny explains as we go. "People are often intimidated but it's actually very easy. I recommend keeping dishes simple, because you don't want to smother the truffle flavour with too many other herbs and spices.

"Start with pasta or risotto and grate a bit over the top. Omelettes, scrambled eggs and mashed potato are also good. You can add it to gravies, soups and chips, or slow roast it under chicken skin over five or six hours. The possibilities are endless. You just have to be careful not to heat it over 75-80C or it loses its flavour."

Jenny's mouth-watering list of recipes is interrupted by another triumphant flop from Thomas. Another false alarm.

I'm learning a lot and enjoying the country air, but given how late it is in the season, Jenny has warned me it's unlikely that we'll find anything – which is why we're all equally surprised when Thomas flops adorably under a hazelnut tree one more time and, after a few minutes of digging, Jenny unearths the black gold. "There you go!" she exclaims. "Must be the last one of the season!"

Before excavating this elusive treasure, Jenny urges me to come in closer for a sniff. I breathe deeply, inhaling the iron-rich earth of Red Hill, but am I smelling truffle? Danielle directs me to an exposed part of the truffle where dirt has made way for bumpy black flesh resembling an overripe avocado and I try again. There it is – something musty and almost ancient. In Europe, where truffles are foraged in the wild rather than farmed, these lumpy fungi have driven people to murder. It's hard to imagine such an unassuming object invoking such madness.

Back in peaceful Red Hill, Jenny rewards Thomas with a doggy treat before liberating this stubborn stayer, which she guesses weighs around 50 grams ('street' value: \$125) and we head inside to clean and weigh him. I can't wait to see how this one will taste grated over a bowl of piping-hot pasta with a glass of the peninsula's finest pinot. **DV**



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Need to know

Red Hill Black Gold tours depart from Melbourne and Mornington Peninsula during winter (truffle season). Tours include a truffière tour, truffle hunt, wine tasting and five-course degustation lunch at Max's Restaurant. For more information, visit maxsrestaurant.com.au/mornington-peninsula-experience. To purchase truffle and truffle products directly, visit redhilltruffles.com

FROM TOP: Thomas on the hunt; a crowd gathers in the truffière; grated truffle adds a hint of decadence to pasta and other simple dishes.