BLACK magic

They've been called everything from seedlings of the gods and warts on the earth's skin to black diamonds and the Mozart of the mushroom world. In fact, the black truffle, or tuber *Melanosporum* to give it its proper name, is a fungus that grows under the ground as a result of a symbiotic relationship with the roots of particular trees (such as English and holly oaks and hazelnuts) that have been infected with the appropriate mycorrhiza (fungus root).

Truffles have been prized since ancient times and shrouded in mystery ever since Aristotle declared them an aphrodisiac. Their cultivation is a relatively recent phenomenon in the southern hemisphere, beginning in New Zealand in late 1980s and migrating to Tasmania in the '90s. They are now grown in every state and territory in Australia (except the Northern Territory) and there are about 150 truffle farmers across the country with a harvest this year of around two tonnes and a total potential crop of 20 tonnes when the 600 hectares of trees currently planted reach maturity. Domestic consumption of this rare and highly sought-after black fungus is currently about half a tonne a year, so the remainder is exported.

Southern Tablelands farmer Wayne Haslam is typical of the growing ranks of

Wayne has 1800 trees across five hectares, all set to produce truffles.

Australian truffle farmers. The immediate past president of the Truffle Grower's Association, he bought a block of land just out of Canberra when he retired from his engineering career in 2001. "I thought of going into wine grapes or olives," he said. "But they both sounded like hard work. I really didn't know much about truffles but they sounded interesting, so I decided to give them a go. It's turned out to be some hard work, with pruning, managing weeds and keeping acidity out of the soil, but it's most rewarding work."

Wayne has about 1800 trees planted across five hectares of his property and sells his entire crop to Canberra restaurateurs and at the Saturday morning Canberra Growers' Market. "We have people coming to the market who have never tasted truffles, so they buy five grams," he explains. "Either you never see them again, or they're back next week buying 10 grams."

As well as being one of the more exotic culinary aromas, the black truffle is also one of the most expensive. In Australia, the little balls of black fungus retail for around $2.50 a gram. On the wholesale market they fetch somewhere between $1500 and $3000 a kilo, depending on quality. Wayne estimates you need about three to five grams per serving to adequately flavour a dish.

When it comes to flavour and aroma, many people have tried to describe its unique, musty, intense mushroom quality, but few have been as evocative as Gareth Renowden, author of *The Truffle Book*. "Truffles smell of old socks and sex," he says. "Open the spice cupboard and take a deep sniff. Crush an unpeeled clove of garlic. Find some damp leaves and dig your fingers into the earth underneath. Then go for something floral — lilies for penetration, roses for sweetness."

Wayne speaks with the conviction of a proud producer when he says that truffles go "with everything". "Start by storing your truffle in an airtight container with eggs and rice," he explains. "They will become infused with the odour. Then you thinly slice or grate the truffle over pasta or serve it with beef, veal, chicken, fish, soufflés, cream and cheese sauces. ➤

Local truffle hunter Jayson Mesman and his Labrador in action.

IN FRANCE, FEMALE PIGS WERE TRADITIONALLY USED TO FIND THE TRUFFLES AS THE AROMA OF RIPE TRUFFLE IS SAID TO CLOSELY RESEMBLE THE BOAR PHEROMONE.

Wayne takes in the unique aroma of fresh truffle.

It goes particularly well with fat and eggs, but it's not limited to savoury foods. Truffle with chocolate is amazing and I recently sampled a white chocolate panna cotta, which was fantastic."

The truffle season in Australia is from late May to early August, perfectly timed to the exact opposite of the northern hemisphere, where in Europe, the USA and Japan they are in demand. Truffles can be found breaking the surface of the ground or up to 20cm deep and are best located by a trained dog that can smell the ripe aroma. After delicately digging around the site, the farmer uncovers the truffle, then uses his nose to assess whether it's fully ripe or needs a few more days or weeks before harvesting. In France, female pigs were traditionally used to find the truffles as the aroma of ripe truffle is said to closely resemble the boar pheromone. "Unfortunately, a sow on the scent of a truffle is a force to be reckoned with," Wayne explains. "Lots of old French truffle farmers are missing fingers. So these days, they tend to use dogs for the job."

When *ACC* caught up with Wayne, he'd called in local truffle hunter Jayson Mesman and his Labradors to help with the harvest. Jayson has been working as a professional dog trainer for the best part of a decade and says that you can train pretty much any dog to be a truffle hunter, but he prefers Labs because of their intelligence.

"You can start training a dog from about eight weeks of age," Jayson says. "You're looking for a dog that likes to please and is a high retriever; that is, likes to chase a ball. You can, in fact, teach an old dog new tricks — they might just take a bit longer to train than a young dog, but after six to 12 weeks you should have a good working dog."

Jayson uses a combination of food, games with squeaky toys and positive attention to reward his dogs. He lets one loose at a time and they catch the scent from hundreds of metres away, depending on the wind, and race directly to the source. After about 30 minutes of hunting, Jayson's dogs have identified about five trees with truffles under the ground and Wayne springs into action, gently digging out the prized black fungus, ascertaining its ripeness and brushing off the residual soil.

Back in the laboratory, he washes off his harvest and weighs in the day's harvest at just over 200 grams. He cuts open one ball to reveal "a good specimen" with a really dark "gleba" (centre) in contrast to the lighter veins.

"Oh well," he says. "There will be no truffles for us tonight. These ones are all going to market. Not bad for a late-season afternoon's work."

For more information, visit www.trufflefestival.com.au or www.trufflegrowers.com.au