

An article a day of enduring significance, in condensed permanent booklet form



School for Truffle Hounds

Condensed from Park East

Robert Littell

THE ONLY boarding school in the world for truffle hounds is in the little Italian village of Roddi, in the Piedmont. Here "Professor Barot," whose real name is Battista Monchiero, will teach practically any dog to sniff out the white truffle — that mysterious underground "mushroom" that brings as much as 850 lire (about \$1.25) per ounce and is the delight of epicures.

In France the black truffle is rooted out of the earth under oak trees by swine. But swine, unlike dogs, love the taste of truffles, so that swine and master must race to see which will get the prized delicacy. There is no school anywhere for truffle swine; and it takes all the skill and patience and wisdom of 74-year-old Barot to teach dogs to find something they don't care a yelp about.

Any pilgrimage to see the school begins at the Grand Hotel Restau-

The gourmet's guide is a dog with an educated nose

rant Savona, in the pleasant market town of Alba. The hotel owners — the Morra family, father and sons — buy, sell, serve, eat and can truffles. Signor Giacomo Morra, an ancient, bald and bony man with eyes glittering behind steel spectacles, showed us a prize truffle about to be airmailed to Uruguay. It was a collection of rooty, loam-colored bulges, a shapeless shape about the size of a soccer ball. We were allowed to feel it, reverently, and sniff it.

The scent of an untamed white truffle, even when sniffed out of doors where it cannot gather momentum, does not suggest a feast. It smells of earth, of dark depths that have never been plowed. But to all right-thinking people of Alba, it is

a lovely, intoxicating and, above all, a prosperous odor.

The nugget we smelled weighed about two and a half pounds. Being of prime quality, it would cost the Uruguayan restaurateur 36,000 lire, or \$58 — or, when shaved several thousand times into various dishes, about two cents per delicious, unforgettable, paper-thin, stamp-size slice.

Guided by Signor Morra's son Mario, who spoke English in enthusiastic gusts and bursts, we drove to Roddi through an autumn countryside gently aflame with tawny hillside vineyards. For centuries the people of this district have hunted truffles, which flourish under oaks, elms, hazelnut trees and poplars. They grow in the same places year after year, and the secret of good hunting grounds is passed from father to son. The treasure is sought stealthily, at night, by dim lanterns and with silent dogs.

The main street of Roddi spirals up to a hilltop and the crumbling remains of a 14th-century castle. As we approached we heard dogs barking, and soon we came upon the dormitory of Professor Barot's unique canine academy. In an open shed were tied eight or ten small, friendly, raceless dogs.

"Well, there is the student body," said Signor Morra, "and now here comes the faculty."

Trudging toward us across the campus was a little man with a face as pleasantly lined as the bark of a fine old tree. His smile was almost

toothless, but in his watery eyes sparkled the three quarters of a century he has spent with animals and earth and a wide sky. Black hat, black coat and waistcoat, black striped trousers with one button missing — he looked as if he had been a wedding guest 20 years ago and had worn these festive clothes ever since. Over one shoulder hung a small pick with a curved steel blade worn from digging deep for truffles.

"First I show you how I teach the dogs, then we go hunting," said Professor Barot. Out of sight of the dogs, he stooped and with the gleaming tool dug a hole into which he put something taken from his waistcoat pocket. Then he came back and unfastened a woolly, wagging little dog named Frick. "*Pei-la, Frick,*" Barot said quietly. "*Pei-la, pei-la* (Go get it)."

Frick darted out, circled sniffing from side to side, and in less than a minute was scratching earnestly with both forepaws. Barot retrieved the truffle — a classroom sample, apparently, good for several hundred burials — from between Frick's paws, and gave him a piece of bread. "If my dogs study well," said Barot, "they get bread. If they disobey, they go hungry."

Every August, some 30 or 40 dogs are brought to the Professor by their owners, who pay tuition and board of about \$6 per dog for the two- or three-weeks course. The dogs are young; practically all are mongrels. When we asked Barot what breed made the best truffle dog

SCHOOL FOR TRUFFLE HOUNDS

he answered: "The son of a smart lawyer may turn out to be a fool, and the son of a foolish peasant can grow up to be a smart lawyer." A top truffle hound is worth 100,000 lire.

When a freshman dog arrives, Barot gives him nothing to eat for two days. Then he takes him out and throws a rag toy for him to bring back over and over again. Every time the dog brings it back, he gets a bit of bread. After a while Barot throws small pieces of truffle instead of the rag. Then he begins to hide the truffle, making it gradually more difficult to find and always rewarding the dog for success. Sniff by sniff, mouthful by mouthful, the dog learns to associate finding a smelly, uneatable truffle with getting a delicious piece of bread. Soon the animal is able to detect truffles as deep as a foot below the surface.

The Professor now unfastened a quiet black-and-white dog named Fido. A sedate college man of four years, Fido was the postgraduate type, serious and ambitious. We all went down a muddy lane into a grove of hazelnut trees, which Barot said had always been a good place for truffles.

"But won't the owner of the grove object?" we asked. Signor Morra explained that anyone was free to hunt truffles on your land, and you on his. It was considered good hunting manners to replace the divots.

Fido began casting about, nose to the ground, with the frenzied concentration of a dog who has just mislaid the trail of a deer. Barot fol-

lowed, talking to him all the while, quietly, hypnotically. "*Pei-la, Fido,*" he was saying, "*pei-la, beica ben*" — Go get it, Fido; keep looking.

Suddenly Fido stopped and began to dig furiously. In an instant Barot was on his knees, chopping out the earth around the truffle before the dog's claws could damage it. Then he straightened up and showed us a truffle about the size of a grape but smelling, as a truffle should, of caverns measureless to man. Fido danced around Barot and stood on his hind legs, quivering with eagerness to get his piece of bread.

For nearly an hour we hunted in the dappled sunlight among the hazel trees. Barot's ceaseless "*Pei-la, pei-la*" tugged at Fido with a leash of gentle words. Every five minutes or so another small truffle would be unearthed. "It is unfortunately not a good season," Barot apologized. "August was too dry."

Truffles are born early in the summer. They are a tiny sort of parasite, attached by microscopic filaments to the trees under which they grow, and they are mysteriously responsive to the cycle of the tree's life. By autumn, if there has been enough rain in August, they can swell up to a great size. From late September to January is the hunting season.

After Fido's demonstration we drove back to Alba, where Signor Morra gave us a lunch which it would be unfriendly ever to forget, but perhaps unwise ever to repeat.

First we had *hors d'oeuvres*, among them large yellow peppers, squalchy

THE READER'S DIGEST

hot in their own juice and covered with truffles. Next we had *insalata di filetti di pollo tartufati*, a sort of minced-chicken salad, hot and as melting in the mouth as its name is poetic to the ear. It was delicately shingled with truffles.

At this point Signor Morra presented us with two of the slicers from which truffles are made to fall gently upon the waiting dish. "Whenever it gets dull," he said, "you just put in another razor blade. Gillette." And he signaled to the hovering waiter to pour us all a second glass of the first red wine — or perhaps it was the first glass of the second.

After that we ate succulent mushrooms, chopped fine, with truffles on top of them, and kneaded into them, and all through them, and influencing them profoundly. There was more wine and the clink of forks, and smacking noises, which faded into the fifth course, one of the Grand Hotel Savona's specialties: raviolini — with truffles. Raviolini are midget ravioli, and like them one of the most painless ways of conveying finely chopped meat to his interior ever invented by man. The raviolini were followed by a *fonduta all Albese con tartufi*, a rich, creamy-yellow rarebit — with truffles. Then came a civet of chamois, cut in strips miraculously sauced, and crowned with truffles.

As this seemed to be approximately the seventh dish or inning, some of us thought of standing up, but were deterred by the serving of a final wine — followed by a chocolate cake with icing molded to resemble truffles. "In Alba," said Signor Morra over the coffee (no truffles), "we have a Truffle Fair every year and select a Truffle Queen. Last year our Miss Truffle was Graziella Fornasari, only 15. Beautiful legs." He passed round her picture. They were indeed. "Before the war, our friend Barot always had a float in the truffle parade. It was a sort of two-story house on wheels. Upstairs there were musicians, downstairs Barot and some of his prize pupils. He had buried truffles in the earth on the floor of the float, and in front of the judges' stand he would turn the dogs loose to find them and dig them up. Everyone cheered."

When at last we left the table and drove the Professor home to Roddi, the shadows were long over the golden countryside. The feast had made us pensive, and we were sad at the thought that Professor Barot, who had inherited from his father and his grandfather a useful and rare and kindly art, was perhaps the last of the truffle-dog schoolmasters. For those of his six sons who survived the wars show no interest in truffles, or in dogs, or in teaching one how to find the other.