



It's 2.25pm on a Tuesday in the little village of Lalbenque, south-west France. Amid the gathering in the main street of mostly locals, tension is high. All eyes are on two rows of wooden trestle tables, where men wearing flat caps and wrapped in winter jackets stand with arms crossed expectantly and women in scarves flapping in the wind greet a neighbour with a quick wave before glancing at their wristwatches and then towards a red flag at the top of the steps of the *hôtel de ville*. Below this flag I spot a sign and suddenly the tension – not to mention the somewhat earthy aroma – makes sense; the sign says '*Marché aux Truffes, Ouverture à 14H30*'.

As the appointed time approaches, a municipal official in an orange hi-vis jacket blows a whistle and waves the red flag with a smile, and suddenly the action near the trestle tables is a heated frenzy of gesticulation and questioning, of sniffing and holding of the knobbly black nuggets lying in red and white gingham-lined baskets on the tables. If you have a soft spot for truffles, specifically black Lalbenque truffles, aka 'black diamonds', this wholesale market held each Tuesday afternoon though the winter is your paradise.

Diamond IN THE ROUGH

Synonymous with French haute cuisine, truffles evoke an elusive mystique. **Karyn Noble** went hunting for 'black diamonds' in the Lot Valley to unearth some of their secrets





Inside the town hall, truffles are weighed and a super creamy truffle cheese is created on the spot and available to buy. The actual truffle transactions appear to be over in mere minutes and I quiz my French guide about what has transpired. There's a typical Gallic shrug as to why some baskets were already covered up and seemingly reserved for buyers prior to the 2.30pm kick-

Above:
Château de Haute-Serre vineyard

Left:
Truffles at Lalbenque

Below:
La Table de Haute-Serre restaurant

off. Why have some not sold, though? "I think perhaps these ones could be too expensive? This is the second-to-last truffle market of the season, so these people are hopeful that if they come back next week, they could be cheaper." That's even more truffle tension for next week's market.

Truffle feasting

Truffle touching, sniffing and observing... if you think one of the most important human senses is being neglected here, fear not. Just five miles from Lalbenque's truffle market lies Château de Haute-Serre (hautesserre.fr/en), a vineyard built from scratch on an abandoned estate by Georges Vigouroux, where his son Bertrand now makes excellent Malbec. Here you can not only indulge in a wine tasting but also various truffle experiences during the season. One of just five restaurants in the Lot

region that holds a Michelin Bib Gourmand, La Table de Haute-Serre is where I happily indulged in a four-course Toques 'n' Truffles lunch, chef Allan Duplouich dishing up the likes of truffle scrambled eggs; haricot bean and beetroot salad with foie gras and black truffle; Jerusalem artichoke, shaved truffle and chard farci; followed by a crème brûlée with truffle ice cream.



Above: Stuffed artichoke with truffles at Le Duèze restaurant





Truffle hunting

One of the most anticipated parts of my trip was not just the truffles and the wines but the opportunity to meet Iago, the truffle-hunting dog, during *cavage* near the Château de Haute-Serre's vineyards. I think I was expecting perhaps a focused beagle or a sharp-eyed springer spaniel, so the sight of the cute chocolate Labrador that came bouncing out of owner Christine Vigouroux's car, tail wagging and very receptive to pats, was quite the surprise.

One advantage of training dogs rather than pigs, is they are less likely to eat the precious fungi. As the wind whipped up and rain started to spatter our muddy boots, Iago was let off the lead and got down to action, racing towards the 1,000 or so trees (two kinds of oak, hazelnut and linden) specially planted to encourage truffle growth in the soil beneath. Circling about the damp ground, Iago soon started digging, with Madame Vigouroux praising his efforts as, with a gloved hand, she

Above:
Truffle-hunting dog Iago with Christine Vigouroux

Right:
The prized truffles don't come cheap





helped unearth the first truffle.

Iago's efforts intensified but so did the rain, so after applauding several of his truffle trophies, we battled the elements back to Château de Haute-Serre's winery for a Truffle Hunter's Tea. Somewhat soaked through and windswept, I was thrilled to learn this tradition involved not 'tea' as such, but a steaming glass of mulled wine and *millas* cake (a rustic pumpkin cake traditional to south-west France, sort of a cross between a *clafoutis*



Above: A statue of a truffle hunter at the market in Lalbenque

and a flan in style), which was the perfect way to cap off an exhilarating afternoon.

Fine dining

My truffle fairy-tale experience was not yet over, however. I was staying at the Château's sister property, the 13th-century Château de Mercuès, which has also been transformed by the Vigouroux family into a 30-room luxury hotel and wine estate, complete with an underground winery and cellar beneath the castle's medieval terrace. Its Michelin-starred Le Duèze restaurant is the sublime setting for chef Julien Poisot's seven-course truffle tasting menu where, after some welcome snacks fireside, we're aromatically tantalised with a platter of truffles before settling in to see how they're reinvented over the course of several hours. Artichoke stuffed with braised beef cheek and Malbec sauce covered in black truffles? Lightly seared scallops, leek gourmandise with truffles and a scallop and Noilly Prat *jus*? These are just some of the

highlights, and if you want a closer look at the action, you can request the cosy chef's table right next to the kitchen where, in between truffle culinary epiphanies, you might even pick up some cooking tips to take home with you. ♥

Karyn took part in the Toques 'n' Truffe two-day experience, staying at Château de Mercuès (chateaudemercues.com/en/) near Cahors. Flights depart London Heathrow with British Airways to Toulouse and from there it's a 90-minute transfer. Alternatively, the train journey from Paris Austerlitz to Cahors takes five hours.

How to train an EXPERT TRUFFLE-HUNTING DOG

Christine Vigouroux, President of the Remarkable Site of Taste of the Lalbenque Truffle Market, took 10 days to train her six-year-old chocolate labrador iago to find truffles.

"At first we try with a piece of cheese; I hide it in a corner so he smells, he finds it, he brings it. Each time he brings it, I give him something he likes. Then after, I put it in the soil. I tell him 'search, find, bring'. And when he understands exactly what I want him to do, I switch the piece of cheese with a truffle. I continue with the truffle and at the end of each day I play with him for half an hour. I carry on like that for 10 days.

After this, we need to go outside and find a situation. I have a friend who is a truffle hunter and he works with another dog [so iago can see] exactly what to do. So, he copies and understands what we want him to do. After that he works alone."