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COVERING SOUTH GIPPSLAND AND BASS COAST

Unearthing South Gippsland truffles

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On the land

Jumbunna truffle grower Noel Fitzpatrick says truffles could be a great option for South Gippsland farmers looking to diversify.

By Kirra Grimes

It's no secret that South Gippsland is slowly but surely cementing itself as one of Victoria's top food and wine regions, offering a feast of high quality produce from award winning cheeses to fine free-range meats, locally caught seafood and organic fruits and vegetables. But what you might not know, is that the region is also home to a handful of truffle farmers whose produce is in demand across the country.

With the beginning of spring marking the end of truffle season (late June to September), we caught up with local truffle farmer and industry consultant Noel Fitzpatrick, to hear all about the opportunities in this burgeoning local industry and what it takes to grow great truffles. Noel started farming French black truffles on a nine-acre property at Jumbunna in 2005, planting 500 French oak saplings, with roots inoculated with fungal spores. It took six years before the first truffles were ready for harvest, with enhanced production year on year as the oak trees' root systems and their fungal partners continually develop.

Noel now sells his truffles primarily online, having built up a strong customer base of home cooks from across Australia over the last six years. He also runs farm tours in season and truffle growing seminars all year, as well as consulting on and project managing new truffle farm projects on the eastern side of Australia, from Kangaroo Island to Stanthorpe in QLD, and everywhere in between.

Having studied truffle growing in Europe and Australia over the last 12 years, Noel says there are several factors to consider in selecting a site suitable for a truffle plantation, including climate, topography, elevation and soil type. "Truffle farming is complex, and science based; the conditions really do need to be right," Noel says. "Because this product spends its whole life-cycle underground, it's sensitive to changes in the soil moisture and temperature. It's susceptible to drying out if it doesn't get enough irrigation in summer, and then when it gets to the point of being ripe in winter, it's also susceptible to being too wet in the soil and can rot."

Ideal conditions for truffle growing, Noel says, include a climate that regularly gets down to around zero to four degrees in winter and up to 28 to 32 degrees in summer, with rainfall of about 600 millimetres plus per year. He says South Gippsland has good potential as a truffle growing region, though on occasion, it can experience heavier rainfall in winter, than would normally be desirable. "The absolute necessity if you're going to grow them in an area with higher rainfall like this, is you must have excellent drainage in the soil. If you've got a very heavy clay soil, it won't work. It's got to be a well-structured, free-draining loam to sandy loam type soil, that doesn't sit above heavy clay."

To harvest the truffles, you'll need a specially trained truffle hunting dog to sniff out exactly where the ripe truffles are (Noel uses Australian Shepherds). You'll need to train your own nose too, says Noel, to be able to "get down on your hands and knees, smell the soil, and make sure the truffle is ripe and ready to come out". "If you take the truffle out of the ground too early, it generally won't keep on developing and reach full ripeness. So, it's very important to develop skills to understand when the truffle should be unearthed". Like any other farming operation, truffle growing requires patience, and a significant financial investment, and Noel urges anyone considering entering the industry not to "race into" anything.

"People think 'oh truffles, \$2500 a kilo, we'll make a fortune if we grow lots,' but that's a retail price. The smallest element of truffles sold in Australia is to retail and then wholesale; restaurants and cafes. "The export market is the real driver of the industry, and the export price this year averaged out at around \$900 a kilo, when you take all classes into account. "That still sounds like a lot, but when you plant your farm up, it's four to five years before you harvest your first truffles and that will only be a small amount, because it builds slowly over a period. If all is going well, you generally don't break even until about year 11 or 12, so you've really got to fund yourself through that whole period."

The good news, Noel says, is that both the domestic and export markets are growing "exponentially" and research conducted in recent years has meant truffles are no longer regarded as a purely speculative crop. Australia is now the fourth largest producer in the world, behind Spain, France and Italy. "There's so much more that we know now, than even five or six years ago. We believe that the crop is quite reliable, given that you do all the things that you should do. So, in terms of a farming alternative or an adjunct to someone's existing farming situation, it is quite interesting to look at truffle growing."

As one of the founding members of the Australian Truffle Growers Association, Noel's excited to see the industry develop and passionate about the role he plays as a consultant and educator. "It's still a relatively small industry, but based on ongoing research we're improving the way we do things all the time. This helps the industry to continually grow and mature. In my role, I'm always searching for better and more efficient ways to do things, particularly in setting up new farms.

I collaborate with a group of European scientists and researchers, so in my own way I'm helping the industry to develop, and it's a lot of fun." As for enjoying the fruits of your labour, Noel recommends incorporating truffles into simple rice, pasta and egg dishes. His favourite ways to enjoy the truffle's distinctive earthy flavour and aroma include, folded through a creamy mashed potato, infused into a soft cheese or truffle ice-cream.

If you want to learn more about truffle farming, visit Noel's website trufflegrowing.com. He's also got an 'Introduction to Truffle and Hazelnut Growing' seminar coming up in Gembrook on October 6. Noel's newly built Jumbunna Truffle House is now closed for the off season, but will reopen in June next year, offering tastings, tours and cellar door sales every Sunday.