

Jonathan McGowan's: My Truffle Hunting Journey

My obsession with truffles started at a young age, probably around five or six. Before I was born my Mum and Dad would drive to France or Spain each summer in their little Triumph Spitfire and eat and stay in exotic sounding places like Provence, Cadaqués and Barcelona. My Mum would always bring back some saffron or tinned truffles and other ingredients to try to recreate the amazing food they'd eaten on their travels. When I came along the sports car went, as did the dreamy summer holidays, but the tinned truffles remained in the cupboard unopened. My Mum was a fantastic cook, our house and kitchen were always open, each dish was full of humility and love and taste. I'd help her cook, chopping and stirring, and constantly learning and tasting. But the unopened tinned truffles in the cupboard turned into a family joke.

Fast forward to my working life. I got to travel the world and eat in some amazing restaurants and eventually tasted truffle and with my mind blown, I thought back to the old, tinned truffles from my childhood. I started to research truffles and bought every book I could find and watched every YouTube video, learning about soil types, aspects, tree identification and then the signs that truffles were present: the brûlé, the truffle fly and animals feasting on the truffles. I became an armchair expert living in the wrong part of the country with no truffle hound!

My wife Sarah changed jobs and became homebased; my kids were growing up and there was constant talk of us getting a dog. I worked in London three days a week so until Sarah was based at home, we couldn't entertain the idea. I capitulated and agreed to get a dog - as long as it was a Lagotto!

So, I contacted the LRCGB and spoke with Julie Nelson who fortunately was fairly local to me in the Northwest; it felt a little like an interview and it was made clear that the breeder matches the dog to the owner rather than prospective owners choosing a puppy. Julie thought I'd have to wait 6 months for a puppy but after a couple of months she messaged me to expect a phone call from a breeder called Elliot. Elliot told me about a lovely puppy whose prospective owners had fallen pregnant and pulled out of the sale. Elliot's family nicknamed the puppy 'Tembo' which means Baby Elephant in Swahili; he was the last born of eight but was 50% bigger than most of his siblings!

We met with Tembo, Elliot and his family and took Tembo home in June 2019.



I'd read lots about truffle training so straightaway we introduced truffle oil infused socks and balls to play time with Tembo. In January 2020 Julie organised a scent workshop I attended, and I tweaked our games introducing a Lotus Flower with truffle oil and high-value treats.

We continued playing these games during Lockdown, we found 15 minutes of 'Find the truffle' was as stimulating as a 40 minute walk and we all enjoyed it.

During Lockdown I got in touch with Melissa Waddingham (truffleandmushroomhunter.com) who ran online courses during Covid. I set up the laptop in the garden and with some guidance from Melissa we put Tembo through his paces with truffle infused cotton wool hidden under clay pots, as well as crucially some blanks to test his reaction to those. It worked really well except for him eating the cotton wool balls! Melissa also advised me to get some old squash balls, stuff them with cotton wool and pour truffle oil on them. This was a game changer as every day I'd throw the ball out into the garden in the dark and if Tembo found it he'd get his reward. I have a lot to thank Melissa for.

Our next step on the journey was an LRCGB organised Truffle workshop with infamous Swiss truffle hunter and trainer, Denise Stalder. I like Denise, she's direct and forthright in her feedback and full of praise and enthusiasm when your dog finds a truffle. The No 1 thing I got from Denise was not to use a command like 'Find it'. This way, if

your dog gets a whiff of truffle they are 'always on' rather than switching on once you've given a command – it could be the difference between finding that illusive giant truffle or not! Denise also makes an amazing Risotto and seems to have truffles in every pocket!

Having done all of the theory and a lot of practice, I needed to get Tembo working. The truffle world is very small and the doors fairly closed, however I got an intro to a gent with a Truffle Orchard; I called him up and told him about my passion and about Tembo, and that I'd be opening a pizza restaurant in 2022 that was going to major in truffles and I needed a truffle supplier. He trusted in me and gave me a run on his truffière. It was such a great day, his dog and Tembo worked through the orchard for about 40 minutes finding 1.3kg of truffles. At one point I saw a 'Grade A' truffle popping out of the ground that weighed around 100g, it was truly amazing!



Bringing the story full circle, my Mum passed away in 2020. As I was sorting out her house, in the highest cupboard in the kitchen I found the old tins of truffles that mesmerised me as a child and still do to this day!

