



# BEST OF THE WEST

WHAT WE'RE TRACKING THIS MONTH

**Were your parents truffle dogs?** Yes—my breed is from Emilia-Romagna, but my actual parents are from Sicily, which is where I was trained when I was just a little bitty pup.

**How are truffle dogs trained?** The way they've been training my breed since about 1540: They would sew a truffle in some cloth and they'd throw the truffle for me and I'd retrieve it, and then they'd hide the truffle, and they'd say, "Dove, Rico, *dove*?" Which means, "Where, where?" And I'd go look for it. And then they would bury it, and they'd say, "Dove, Rico?" and I'd dig it up—dig dig dig dig.

**Have you ever eaten a truffle?** Some of us like to eat them and some of us don't. Sometimes, if we find undesirable truffles, the handlers give those to us; otherwise we just get a treat.

**Which is what?** For me, organic buffalo hot dogs. It's got to be a pretty darn good treat for me to not want to eat the truffle.

**Do you need to be a Lagotto Romagnolo to hunt truffles?** Any type of dog can learn to do it. Really, what makes a good truffle dog is temperament. You want a dog that wants to please and has a good sense of concentration. When I'm hunting and there are other dogs, I let them know, Hey, I'll play with you, but not right now. When I hear the magic word, *dove*—it's game on. Nothing else matters. That's what separates me from the others who just hang out and eat truffle cheese. Which I do like, by the way. You got some?

*Festival events from \$60; Jan 16–19; [napatrufflefestival.com](http://napatrufflefestival.com).*



## *Rico the truffle dog*

The absolute highlight of the Napa Truffle Festival is the truffle-hunting demonstration at Robert Sinskey Vineyards. (The festival is presented by the American Truffle Company, which convinces Napa Valley landowners to plant black-truffle orchards—Sinskey's will be the first to produce the fungus, beginning this year.) Why? The star of the show, Rico, who's a four-year-old Lagotto Romagnolo, an Italian breed of retriever. When he's not digging for treasure, he lives in the East Bay with his owner and *tartufãio* (truffle hunter), Bill Collins, a psychologist whose day job is treating traumatized veterans. (Rico helps him out with that too.) We chatted with Rico recently about his work.

Photograph by JOHN CLARK