



Truffle Hound
Rowen Jacobsen
(Bloomsbury, £20)

IMAGINE a classic scene: night in the Umbrian forest, flashlights, a truffle hound and a local guide to remind you that truffles don't come easy, that they're rare and hard to find—and expensive. For hours, you brush through the woods, with the occasional false start, until, only moments before dawn, the dog stiffens and points and you breathlessly scrape away the soil to find this little nugget of black gold. Triumph! Disclosure: your rustic guide buried it earlier, to guarantee customer satisfaction. It's a fake.

When a 3.3lb monster truffle found near Pisa can sell to a Macao casino for \$330,000, skulduggery and obfuscation will ever haunt the trade. Most truffles sold at the so-called truffle capital of the world, Alba in Umbria, come in from Croatia, Hungary or Spain, although no one in Alba would tell you that. The truffle that you or I might

buy—together with the scented oils—are cheap and tasteless, bulked out with a few drops of 2,4-dithiapentane. For 20 years, profits were made drenching imported Chinese black truffles. I know: I had one, done up in an Italian jar. It might have been made of black chalk, for all it smelt of mushroom.

Following trails as hidden as mycelium across the truffle grounds of Europe and America, *Truffle Hound* is a gripping adventure story. As the author explains, the white (*Tuber magnatum*) is king: sexy, sweaty and never cooked, just grated fresh at the last moment. The black winter (*T. melanosporum*), associated with Perigord, is layers of tobacco, cognac and forest floor, perfect for slipping under a roasting bird's skin. Watch out for black Autumns, *bianchetto* and *brumale*—and that's not the end of it.

Truffle cultivation is coming on by leaps and bounds, too, even on Wiltshire chalk: truffles love lime. In symbiosis with trees, their delicate network of microscopic filaments absorbs

minerals in the soil, which they pass on to the growing trees in return for sugar, as their complex scent makes them irresistible to animals—such as us.

Smells, notoriously hard to describe, are powerfully direct. We mediate our other senses through the thalamus, then to the higher brain and finally to the primitive brain, the limbic system of memory and emotion. Only smells go straight to the emotional core: back to school, a foreign city or a seven-volume memoir, if you're Proust fingering a madeleine. With truffles, we might do well to draw the veil.

There's so much in here, about dogs and trees, science and romance, about smells and cooking. Rowan Jacobsen previously wrote an award-winner about oysters and *Truffle Hound* should sweep the board: it is funny, fascinating and fearless. For all his truffle nuts and woodland weirdos, it's ultimately down to the real hounds, Lagotto Romagnolos, black labs, mongrels and even a tiny chihuahua called Merguez. Bravo, chef!
Jason Goodwin



**The Last Viking:
The True Story
of King Harald
Hardrada**
Don Hollway
(Osprey, £20)

TO many British readers, Harald Hardrada, King of Norway, will be familiar as a third and subsidiary player in the crisis that overtook England after the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066. He landed in Yorkshire, an area with strong connections with Scandinavia, and was killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. The same wind that carried his defeated survivors home then famously brought William of Normandy to Pevensey and the defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

‘His fortunes were no less extraordinary than his travels’

This book removes Harald Hardrada from the periphery of this English story and places him centre stage of a global one. He was born in Norway, but moved across Eastern Europe and then to Byzantium, where he joined the Varangian guard of the Emperor in Constantinople. In that service, he fought across sea and land and even visited Jerusalem. His fortunes were no less extraordinary than his travels, rising and falling with breathtaking speed. Eventually, he escaped imprisonment to return to Norway, where he successfully asserted his claim to the throne. From there, he launched his final and ill-fated campaign to win England.

Don Hollway tells this astonishing story with immediacy and verve, making use of an enormous breadth of sources. He necessarily provides a great deal of context to his narrative, but it never flags, although some of the violence is not for the faint-hearted. An engaging and unexpected read. ↪
John Goodall



Sniffing out the goods: Rowan Jacobsen reveals the mysteries, science and skulduggery of truffles