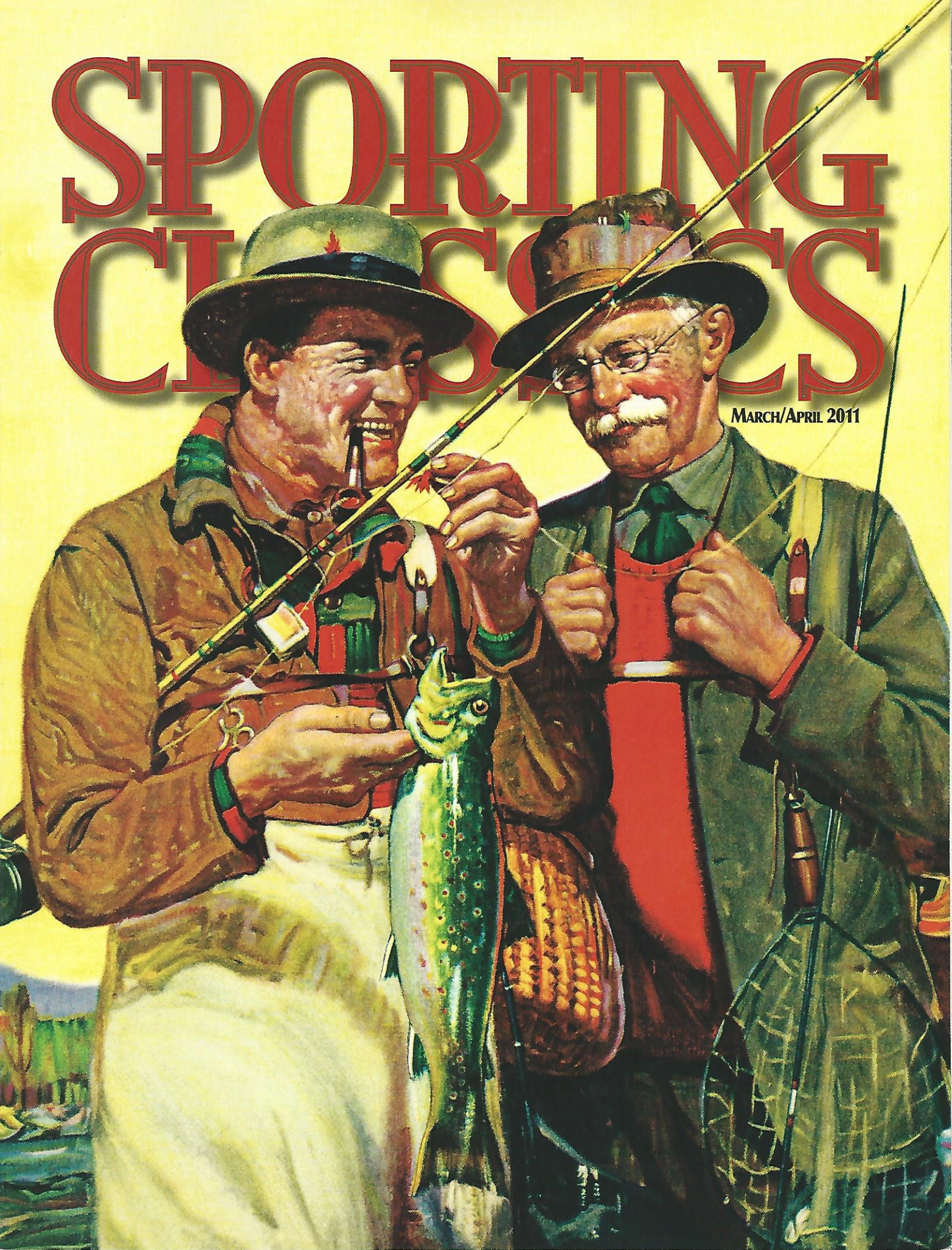


SPORTING CLASSES

MARCH/APRIL 2011



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Travel

By John Ross

Blackberry Farm outside of Walland, Tennessee, is as well known for its cuisine as it is for its trout. When I heard that this Relais & Chateau property had gone to the dogs, I figured that proprietor Sam Beall had something up his sleeve.

The story goes like this: Four years ago a man appeared at the back door of Beall's kitchen. He carried a Tupperware container. The chef politely inquired as to its contents. Truffles, the chef was told. *Yeah right*, the chef thought.

Truffles, fungi that grow on the roots of trees, are highly prized by gourmards, those folks who are as snooty about their vittles as I am about my bamboo rods. Fresh truffles are a bit pricy. Last year a 1.6 pound white truffle was purchased by a wealthy Californian for \$150,000. Most are not so large. Yet a pound of this species sells for roughly \$1,500, about half the price of top-quality caviar. By comparison, black or Perigord truffles are cheap, only \$600 to \$700 a pound.

Blackberry's chef was justifiably dubious. The foothills of Tennessee's and North Carolina's Appalachians provide climate and soils very similar to northeastern Italy and parts of France, renowned over the centuries for their truffles. A few years ago North Carolina initiated a specialty crops program aimed at

In the foothills of the Appalachians, they're using a rare species of dog to search out one of the earth's most valuable culinary treasures.



Italian imports, truffle hunters Tom and Lussi are Lagotto Romagnolos, a curly coated breed originally bred for waterfowl.

encouraging former tobacco farmers to grow truffles instead. Though Perigord and white truffles are in high demand, other species of truffles abound and many grow wild in the hills of East Tennessee. Just what the man at the back door was offering, the chef did not know.

He opened the container and took a whiff. His eyes rolled in ecstasy. No mistake about it, fresh black truffles. A whole pint of them! The guy with the truffles was Tom Michaels, the first farmer in America to establish a commercially viable truffle orchard or *truffière*. Michael's orchard is located in Chuckey, Tennessee, little more than a long double-haul cast from Walland. Given Blackberry Farm's reputation for gourmet cuisine and cooking schools, Tom figured that he might find a market for his fungi.

Michaels isn't a farmer who turned his tobacco allotment into *truffière*. Raised on a mushroom farm in Naperville, Illinois, Michaels earned a PhD from the University of Oregon and his dissertation was on the cultivation of Perigord truffles. To feed his family he conducted mushroom research for Dole Foods. Retirement landed him in Chuckey with its good soils and gentle winters.

Unlike other woods fungi, truffles do not grow above ground. They're

found just below the surface. Wild hogs with their sensitive snouts root for them. The French for centuries used pigs to hunt truffles. The practice was somewhat problematic. How do you get a 350-pound porker to whoa, sit and stay when it's caught the scent of a truffle? Dogs are much more effective, and they can sleep inside by the fire.

Since the Perigord is indigenous to Romagna, the lake region of northeastern Italy above Bologna, it made sense to Michaels to find a truffle dog from that district. But there was a much closer source. Three years before Michaels planted his *truffière*, Hilarie Gibbs and Mel Sykes, 100 miles down the interstate in Lenoir, Tennessee, married and started the search for a dog that would please them both. She wanted one that was small and he, a bird hunter, wanted a gundog. And a run-of-the-mill puppy would not do.

In her research, Hilarie discovered the Lagotto Romagnolo, a curly coated breed of about 35 pounds used by Italians to hunt waterfowl . . . and, it turns out, truffles. Known for their highly selective sense of smell, Lagottos are easy to train and make superb companions. The couple imported a bitch that had been bred to a champion in Italy. Hilarie's were the first Lagotto puppies whelped in the United States.

Training a Lagotto is not especially difficult, according to Sykes. The key is rubbing a little truffle-infused olive oil – anywhere from \$9 to \$90 a pint – into the belly and teats of the bitch just as she's about to birth her litter. From the very moment they are whelped, the puppies associate the scent of truffle with food, warmth and contentment. (Anybody know where I can find grouse-scented olive oil?)

Sykes begins playing "find the truffle" games when the pups are a few weeks old, just like you and I would use a dried wing of a pheasant or woodcock. He puts a bit of dried truffle in an old sock and commands the puppy to seek it – *cercare* – in Italian. As the dog becomes more adept at finding the truffle sock, he

deploys five identical socks, two with truffles and three without. The Lagotto is rewarded each time it finds the right sock. Next, the socks are buried just underground. When the pup scents the truffle, it gets "birdy" and quivers with excitement. Other breeds with good noses can be similarly trained.

Soon after Michaels appeared at the back door of Blackberry's kitchen, farm proprietor Sam Bealls decided to plant a truffle orchard and acquire a pair of Lagottos to hunt the fungi.

Two years ago he contacted Hilarie. She recruited Tom, a five-year-old experienced truffle dog from Romagna, and Lussi, a bitch then a pup. Both dogs get their work in on Tom Michael's *truffière*.

As I write this, thin snow covers the ground, and Michael's busy harvesting Perigords. Come spring, when redbud blushes the fringe of the fields around Blackberry Farm and hatches of blue quills and quill

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gordons turn on browns and rainbows, you may find me on the farm's patio, dining on fingerling trout with field peas and truffles. ➔

Fingerling Trout on Field Peas and Truffles

Beans

- Clarified Butter
- 2 oz small diced Country Ham
- 5 oz diced leeks
- 1 oz minced shallots
- 2 tbsp fresh winter black truffles
- 4 oz diced celery
- 4 cloves sliced garlic
- 2 cups Field Peas
- Vegetable stock to cover
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 thyme sprigs
- ¾ lb. Yukon potatoes small dice

Render ham in butter; add shallots, then leeks, then garlic. Do not let any of the aromatics brown. Add beans and bay leaf and thyme. Add vegetable stock just to cover. When beans are ¾ cooked, add potatoes and finish cooking till the potatoes are tender. Add in the truffle and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Wine Truffle Butter

Reduce 2 cups of white wine and ½ oz of shallot down to ¼ cup. Whisk in 8 oz of whole butter and 2 tbsp of minced fresh truffle.

Trout

6 small trout butterflied, but with heads attached, or use 4-inch fillets.

1 cup corn flour

Kosher salt

2 tbsp chopped parsley

Season the trout and flour with kosher salt. Mix the chopped parsley into the corn flour. Dredge the trout in the corn flour and let stand for 5 minutes. Pan fry the trout on medium high for 2 minutes per side until golden on both sides.

To serve, place 3 tablespoons of beans on the center of an oblong plate. Put 1 fingerling trout on top and dress with a drizzle of wine butter sauce. Garnish with 3 shaves of fresh truffles over the top of each plate.