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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 38(1) : 88-89

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm214>

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Oaks and the Apennines: Truffle Cultivation, Heritage Foods, Sustainability and Well- Being in Italy

By Tamara Griffiths. Macerata, Italy:
Edizioni Ephemera, 2017. 215 pp. £
11.41, US\$ 15.00. ISBN 978-88-
87852-219.

It's hard not to begin with admiration. In *Oaks and the Apennines: Truffle Cultivation, Heritage Foods, Sustainability and Well-Being in Italy*, not only does Tamara Griffiths step beyond the role of academic researcher and into a physically demanding life of truffle cultivation, but she also dares to break the mold of traditional academic writing.

In academic writing, establishing what is sometimes a feigned distance between a passionate researcher and her subject can be disingenuous. At the same time, researching foodways without a hand in the soil and some economic skin in the game risks missing key realities and insights. Griffiths is neither artificially dispassionate about truffle production in the Apennines, nor is she uninformed by virtue of not trying her hand at artisanal truffle production. Having purchased a piece of land in the Sibillini Mountains of central Italy, Griffiths tackles her research in the hardest way. With almost no experience in the hidden “black” world of truffle cultivation, she takes to the steep slopes to try and transform her own parcel of land into a truffle operation.

Were the slopes and lack of expertise not enough of an impediment, Griffiths is both a foreigner and a woman trying to enter what is clearly a closed, local fraternity. With tens of thousands of euros to be won and hundreds of thousands to be lost, truffle gatherers and producers in the Apennines keep

their harvest locations and their cultivation methods secret.

Had Griffiths assumed the role of a roving researcher merely asking questions, she would have been hard pressed to gather enough verifiable information for a solid academic paper, much less a book. However, her slow immersion into the culture, her visible work ethic, and her willingness to ask for advice from a variety of other producers meant that her male counterparts began to shed light on their “black” economy of truffle production. Had she not hired locals to help her prepare her land or purchased inoculated tree stock from various nurseries, she would likely have never stumbled upon the questions to ask, much less the answers to some of them. Nor was there a guidebook to serve as her Virgil through the inferno of inexperience. Instead, her sinuous path gradually led her to compile that missing tome.

What results is an intensely researched and markedly eclectic book. *Oaks and the Apennines* reflects Griffiths' varied background as a scriptwriter, a student of sustainable mountain development, an avid hiker, and a beginning truffle *cultivator*—not to be confused with a truffle *hunter*. Her penchant for dialogue, capturing it and recounting it, is a tribute to her work as a successful scriptwriter. Voices, details, and even vocal disagreements among other cultivators are carefully gathered, preserving the colloquial instead of masking it in obtuse academic prose. The dialogue carries a cultural richness and adds an authenticity to the book that might be missing were it not captured so effectively. That said, some readers may at first find the scripted style of the narration closer to portions of a screenplay than what they might expect in such a book, and there are times when the dialogue is inserted with little to no transition from a more formal style, which brings out a key point about the book.

Oaks and the Apennines reads at times as a mix of genres. Griffiths is eager to hit the topic of truffle culture and cultivation from every possible angle. The book is, in a sense, a kaleidoscopic view of truffles, a mosaic of images from a surprising number of prisms, written with a variety of styles. Griffiths recounts the nearly ethereal mountain landscapes with poetic prose, she delves into the ascetic traditions of local religious hermits and earthy truffle hunters, and she revels in architectural and historical descriptions of the region's cities and towns. Of course, truffle cultivation also requires an appreciation for microscopic perspective in order to note species differentiation and an understanding of complex ecological interactions that influence which trees in which conditions will actually produce truffles ... or not. That question—production or a lost investment—leads Griffiths into how truffle cultivation might be a key component of sustainable development in this mountainous region. The reader travels with Griffiths on her journey as on a mountain path: the route wends its way through the uneven terrain of salt-of-the-earth people and academic literature. While the path takes a few unexpected turns and halting leaps, it is hard not to want to follow along and find out what lies at the end. Without giving away the power of the script, it may be noted that the denouement of this unusual research narrative is worth waiting for.

Of course, any book about truffles has to include a sensory evaluation of different species (with radically different values due to availability and taste), but Griffiths takes it one step further and also provides recipes of the region in her final chapter, offering the last colorful prism of her kaleidoscopic adventure.

In the end, Griffiths certainly succeeds in creating the truffle cultivation guide that she was unable to find. With the mixture of styles employed, the work might not be

seamless, but it is rich in color. *Oaks and the Apennines* is less a weaving than a stitching, more a quilt than a tapestry. Who is to say that one is more a demonstration of deft artisanship than another? What does seem clear is that one is more utilitarian than the other, and, in this case, that is what matters. Griffiths leaves us with an object of warmth and utility.

For those of us who are discontents destined to be splayed across the crevasse between

intellectual discourse and the simple absorption of the voices and visions that move us, such examples of academic writing are important. Griffiths set out to fracture a tradition, not necessarily to crack the code. It will take all of us some time to crack the code together. In the meantime, *Oaks and the Apennines* stands on its own, an unwavering testament to the culture that Griffiths set out not just to document, but also to inhale.

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