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Home Today's Paper Sports Careers Homes Autos Entertainment Forums Services Hotel & Restaurants

SEARCH News GO! Monday

- Sunday
- News
- Local News
- Insight
- Business
- Sports
- Sunday Currents
- Arts
- Travel
- » Home »
- Homescape
- Books
- The Last Week
- Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Weekly Sections
- Books
- Personal Tech
- Enlace
- Family
- Food
- Home
- Homescape
- Insight
- Night & Day
- Religion & Ethics
- Sunday Arts
- Travel
- Quest
- Wheels

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## Passing the sniff test

### Dog with a nose for mold is unleashed in San Diego

By **Cathy Lubenski**  
STAFF WRITER

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Some unknown wag once said, "To a dog, the whole world is a smell."

Every dog owner in the world is now thinking, "Well, DUH! No kidding." But it's taken quite awhile for humans to capitalize on knowledge that's always been – let's face it – right in front of their noses.

Dogs are trained to find missing persons, sniff out bombs, to determine the cause of fires, nose out illegal drugs, and are even being trained to smell cancer in humans.

And now, there are mold dogs. Wishbone, whose humans are Bob and Sue Fennema of La Mesa, is a mold-sniffing, 15-month-old Jack Russell terrier that cost about \$9,700, one of only about 20 mold-sniffing dogs in the entire country.

Even for a purebred Jack Russell, \$9,700 is a lot of money, but that sum includes the hours and hours of training it took for Wishbone to learn how to sniff out mold in homes, apartments and commercial buildings.

Although there is no such thing as "toxic mold," mold growing in homes and businesses can trigger asthma and allergies in sensitive people. And, with mold infestations costing thousands of insurance dollars every year, not to mention the toll in human suffering, Wishbone is a fetching alternative to today's costly air-testing procedures.

"We're going to start out charging a \$250 service charge and \$125 an



hour for Wishbone to come to a building," said Fennema, whose home-inspection and consulting business, Monteverde, has been in operation for 12 years.

"This is still more economical than air testing, which is very inaccurate. After mold is discovered in a building that way, then there has to be a visual inspection. Mold may be seen on the east wall and cleaned off, but when the air testing is done again in the room, it can then be discovered on the west wall, as well. Wishbone will go right to where the mold is growing and signal the find. This is not sloppy science, this is very precise."

In a recent, informal test given to Wishbone by a Carlsbad environmental consulting company, the pup managed to sniff out mold sealed in Ziploc baggies. "He hit on the mold and ignored all the bagged bacteria that was set out as dummies," said Fennema.

"I was even more impressed with his abilities after I saw this test."

When Wishbone is put to work, he's told to "seek." Fennema walks alongside the leashed dog, who then sits when he smells mold. Fennema tells him "show me" and Wishbone will put his nose up to the spot where he smells the mold.

Fennema spent a week learning how to handle Wishbone at Mold Dog, a subsidiary of the Florida Canine Academy in Safety Harbor, Fla., where master trainer Bill Whitstine has been training dogs in flammable accelerants detection and other fields since 1989.

Whitstine only uses dogs from the Pinellas Humane Society shelter, where Wishbone was "on doggy death row," according to Tovey Giezentanner, a spokesman for Mold Dog.

Whitstine looks for the smartest dogs, then uses food reinforcement techniques to train them. He and a researcher at Auburn University "worked out the science behind teaching dogs to sniff out mold," Giezentanner said.

"The dogs are 95 to 98 percent accurate," he added. "And who can argue with a dog? A dog isn't biased, a dog doesn't have ulterior motives.

"The crazy thing about dogs is that they 'see' their worlds through their noses," Giezentanner said. "Humans are visually oriented, but with dogs, smell is their primary sense. They have incredible differentiation abilities."

According to an Auburn University study, the limits of olfactory detection in dogs range from tens of parts per billion to 500 parts per trillion.

"This is the best tool I ever bought," Fennema said. "What better tool

could you have than one who thanks you."

Tool? Fennema also refers to Wishbone as "our guy" and admits to playing ball with him until he's so tired he puts himself to bed. Not Fennema, Wishbone, the dog with the educated nose.

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