

Denzil Sturgiss grew up on a property in the rugged headwaters of the Shoalhaven River and until about six years ago had never heard of truffles.

He has still never tasted the great French delicacy used to flavour gourmet food, but hopes it will generously fund his retirement. Mr Sturgiss, 60, is one of the small band of NSW farmers who have taken a punt on producing one of the world's most elusive and expensive food items.

Australian truffle farming has been pioneered by Duncan Garvey's Perigord Truffles of Tasmania, which hopes to export the pungent black fungus from Australia to the world at premium prices when they are unavailable from their native Europe.

Truffles grow naturally among the roots of oak and hazelnut trees in the forests of southern France and are harvested in winter using specially trained dogs or pigs to sniff them out.

Tasmania's first truffle orchards, or truffieres, were established in 1993 and the first truffle was found there in 1999. Last winter Perigord harvested 15 kilograms and this winter the best product has sold to Sydney restaurants for up to \$4000 a kilogram, Mr Garvey said.

In 2001, the first truffieres were established in NSW, although so far the only truffles harvested on the mainland have come from Western Australia. There are now 22 sites in NSW ranging from one to nine hectares.

Having spent about \$100,000 putting in three hectares of oak and hazelnut trees since 2002, Mr Sturgiss said: "I've got no money, but plenty of hope."

He hopes the first truffles will be harvested in 2006 and that each hectare will eventually yield up to 40 kilograms a year. His money has gone on 1700 seedlings with their roots inoculated with the fungus, irrigation, an electric fence and 150 tonnes of lime to turn the acidic light basalt soil alkaline, like that in France's south.

"We have got the right sort of ground with the right location and the right temperature," Mr Sturgiss said. Truffieres need to be close to airports so they can be rushed to market, but the key to growing the finest truffles is regular sub-zero weather. All NSW's truffieres are in cold climate areas such as Oberon, Orange, Yass, Tumbarumba and near the Southern Highlands village of Tarago, where Mr Sturgiss has his property.

Mr Sturgiss was hooked when he visited Tasmania and was taken to the hole where a truffle had been dug out the day before.

"You could still smell it," he said of the odour William Thackeray described as "something musky, fiery, savoury, mysterious - a hot drowsy smell that lulls the senses and yet enflames them". French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed truffles could even make "women more tender and men more loveable".