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## Mushroom growing couple claim truffle breakthrough

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THAMSANQA MAGUBANE

A HOWICK mushroom company has claimed a historic breakthrough, being involved in the first production of a black truffle in South Africa.

Sandra van Rij owns Mushrush, based in Merrivale near Howick, where she and her husband, Neil, produce the trees used to grow truffle fungi. The first truffle grown on one of their trees was unearthed by a Dullstroom farmer.

Mushroom researcher Neil, who works at the Department of Agriculture, said this was a breakthrough that proved that truffles could be produced in South Africa and that would revolutionise the truffle mushroom industry.

"This opens doors for new markets and investment opportunities," he said.

To grow truffle mushrooms, which can cost thousands of rand per kilogram, you need an oak tree and truffle spores. The acorn is germinated and the spores attached to the roots of the plant. The truffle tree is planted in specially prepared soil and truffles should form within seven to 10 years.

At their smallholding yesterday, Sandra and Neil showed *The Witness* several of the trees being prepared for truffle farming.



Neil van Rij and his wife, Sandra, hold up their truffle mushroom at their smallholding near Howick.

PHOTO: JONATHAN BURTON

"For the process to be successful, the planting needs to be in specific climatic areas and the Midlands is one such area ideal for truffle growing," Neil said.

He said the farmer who found the truffle on the Mushrush tree took pictures of it and sent samples for identification. Van Rij identified and analysed the sample as a truffle, which was con-

firmed by a professor in Italy.

"The confirmation came on December 31. It was a nice ending to the year," said Sandra.

Pungent truffle mushrooms are considered a delicacy. They grow underground and are usually found using specially trained dogs and female pigs.

"This is confirmation that truffles

can be grown here. No one had ever done that before. It is a breakthrough, significant and very exciting," Neil said.

"There are investors who took a chance on this... but now there is confirmation."

Neil said the truffle business was not one for quick profits. "Those involved view this as a long-term investment."