

Future of coffee assured in N.Q.

AUSTRALIA'S first coffee harvester, operating on the Atherton Tablelands, has proven to be an economical success in its initial test trials.

The harvester is one of only a handful in the world and was imported from New Zealand at a cost of \$70,000 by Mareeba Coffee Estate, owned by brothers Dick and Nat Jaques.

Sid Goldworthy, inventor and designer of the harvester, said it was a modified berry harvester which his company manufactures in New Zealand. Across the Tasman it is used for the harvesting of red currants, raspberries and blueberries.

Economic surveys conducted by Mareeba Coffee Estate determined the harvester would need to pick up 1.5 tonnes of coffee cherries per acre to be a viable proposition. However, the machine went beyond all expectations in

its first trial and scooped up 1.75 tonnes per acre.

With some minor modifications and fine tuning Dick and Nat hope to achieve around the two tonne per acre mark.

The harvester was tested at the Department of Primary Industries Kairi research station on the Tablelands and will be used to harvest the company's first crop in 12 months. The estate is nine kilometres from Mareeba and comprises 85 acres planted out in coffee trees. All are expected to reach maturity in a year or so.

Public

The Jaques brothers are also establishing another coffee plantation in the area, shares in which will be sold to the public.

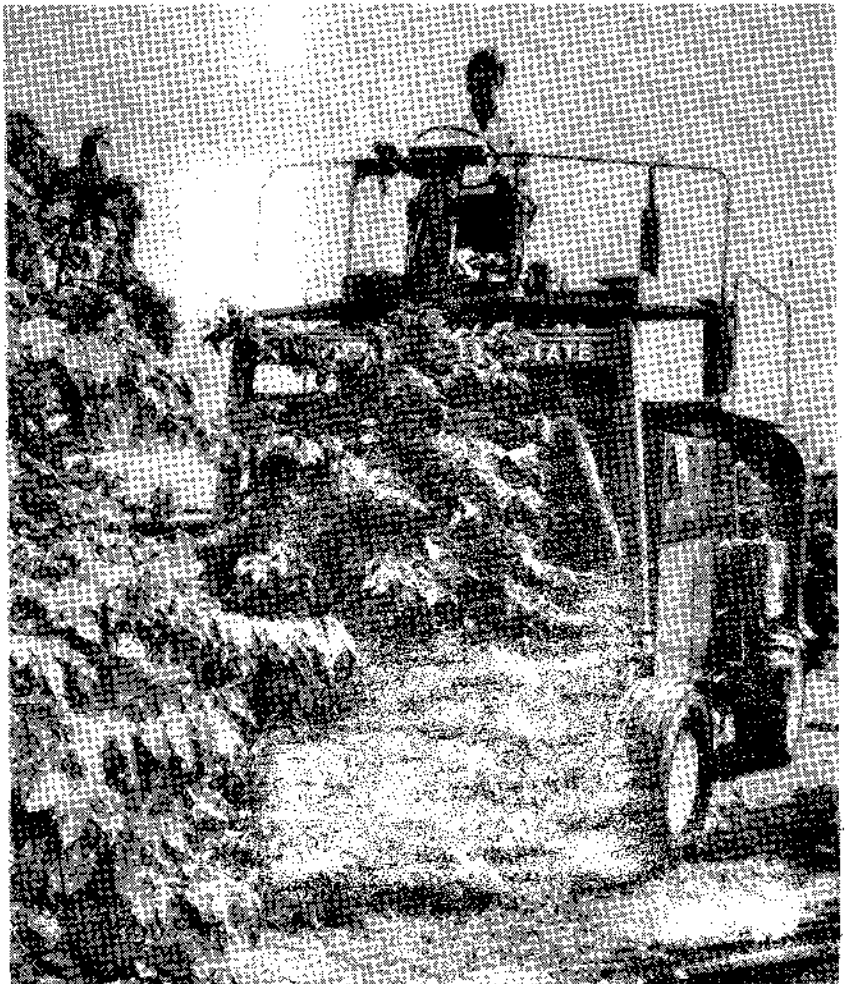
With the average price for Arabica coffee - the variety grown by the company - currently standing at between \$3.75 and \$4 per kilogram and the cost of production being below \$1.50, the future of the crop looks assured in North Queensland.

Up until the present coffee has been mainly a Third World crop, due chiefly to cheap labour and ground being unsuitable for most other plantings. Many countries also do not have mechanisation because of the rugged terrain on which the coffee trees were planted.

With the harvester reducing the need to rely on handpicking - a procedure which would be uneconomical in Australia - the Jaques brothers foresee this country producing coffee at a viable price well below the escalating prices being asked on the world market.



THE COFFEE cherries themselves. The beans are inside these cherries and are removed before drying and roasting. The different varieties of coffee available depend on the roasting given.



NAT Jaques on the new coffee harvester, recently imported from New Zealand. The harvester actually drives over the top of the coffee trees and oscillates the plants, causing the ripe cherries to drop. Recent trials have indicated the harvester will pick up 1.75 tonnes of cherries per acre - an amount well in excess of an economic level. This signals the vast potential the coffee crop has in North Queensland.