

First coffee in 50 years in September

AUSTRALIAN coffee will be in the shops in about September — the first crop of beans grown commercially in this country in more than 50 years is being harvested now on the Atherton Tableland.

The Jaques Brothers, Nat and Dick, set up the Mareeba Coffee Estate just outside Mareeba some four-and-a-half years ago.

Both are eminently qualified, being brought up on a coffee farm in Tanzania, East Africa, where their parents are still growing coffee today.

While Nat is the plantation manager, Dick is the businessman of the partnership.

Nat Jaques managed the family farm in Tanzania for a few years before emigrating to Australia with his wife, Linda.

Dick took a different route, gaining a psychology degree at an American university before moving to Australia where he joined Woolworths in Sydney.

After completing the Woolworths management training scheme he spent five years with the company, ending up a store manager and eventually Group Manager.

And now that their Mareeba venture is in production, Dick has lured

an old Woolworths colleague, Mr Jonathan Sutherland, north to join him as marketing manager of Jaques Bros. Coffee Pty Ltd, a company set up to oversee the roasting, packaging and marketing of the Mareeba Coffee Estate's product.

It's been a long, hard road for the Jaques.

The Mareeba district is not intrinsically perfect for growing coffee, but you can pick spots where it becomes a viable proposition.

In the Mareeba Coffee Estate's case, for instance, the plantation is located up the slopes of the hills and consequently doesn't suffer the frosts experienced further down, only five miles away. Frost, of course, is coffee's worst enemy.

"You could grow coffee on the coast, but the problem there is the erratic rainfall pattern," Dick Jaques told *The Register*.

The first harvest is now underway and the



company expects a yield of between 30 and 50 tonnes of green beans.

The brothers insist on keeping the whole process under their wing, from tree to jar and the main hold-up at this stage is the roasting plant.

The plant is being assembled now but not all equipment is in place yet and the time of the coffee's arrival on North Queensland's store shelves will depend on how soon the Jaques brothers can start roasting.

In the meantime, the green beans are being stored and can remain in storage for long periods provided they are kept well aired and away from strong odours.

When the Jaques first arrived their block was just virgin bush. Today they have 77 hectares (190 acres) under cultivation, growing 240,000 coffee trees.

The trees went in three-and-a-half years ago and will not reach maturity until they're about five years old.

When the farm is fully productive the Jaques brothers hope to produce at least 250 tonnes of coffee a year, of both the roasted bean and ground coffee variety, and marketed as "Jaques Bros. Coffee."

Said Dick Jaques: "We're looking at a yield of at least two tonnes an acre, and that's probably the highest anywhere in the world."

In fact the Mareeba operation is likely to be the world's most efficient coffee plantation.

"Nobody in the world is doing it the way we are doing it," Dick said.

The basis of the operation is a unique drip irrigation system used to ensure the coffee berries ripen uniformly, while a specially developed mechanical harvester is at the heart of what would otherwise have been an impossible venture because of excessive labour costs.

Drip irrigation is, of course, not particularly

exceptional in itself, but what makes the Mareeba system doubly unique is the fact that it is also used to feed the fertiliser through it.

And there, in fact, is where a large part of the money and effort spent so far has gone.

"It took us three years to develop the right fertiliser program for growing coffee under the circumstances we have here in Mareeba," Dick said.

"There simply weren't any data for us to go on, particularly not for a system involving drip irrigation controlling the exact nutrient levels of the trees.

"Nobody anywhere in the world had ever done it before, so we couldn't go out and ask. We had to do it ourselves.

"We've put about \$1 million into it so far. We've had no help from anybody."

However, the effort is now beginning to pay off and Mr Jaques said the

harvest was "going along nicely."

"We won't be finished for another month, but it's top quality," he said.

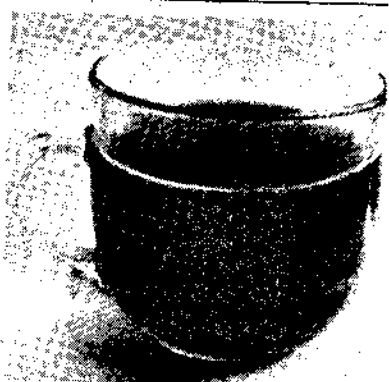
Compared to Third World coffee producers, the Australian operation is much more scientific and combined with the mechanical harvester has managed to overcome the one advantage its overseas competitors have: cheap labour.

In fact, despite the drip irrigation system, the Mareeba plantation could not be made to pay its way without the mechanical harvester.

Mechanical harvesting is not a world first, but there are only two other companies in the world who have successfully developed and used similar machines. Both are Brazilian.

The Jaques machine is based on a harvester developed in New Zealand to harvest delicate blueberries, redcurrants and raspberries.

As a coffee harvester it is built around a 44Kw hydraulically-driven tractor, with a shaker system of four agitators with fibreglass "fingers" which gently shake the



Refreshing coffee... soon we will be able to enjoy a truly homegrown blend of coffee.

ripe coffee berries from the trees.

The Mareeba plantation is growing only Coffee Arabica varieties, and blind tests conducted by experts recently declared a sample of Jaques coffee to be on a par with "Kenyana AA," generally regarded as the best coffee in the world.

Two other coffee groups, "Robusta" and "Liberica," are regarded as inferior although they are generally harder and more disease resistant than Arabica coffee varieties.

Most cheaper coffees available in the shops are mixtures of Robusta and Liberica, with a small amount of Arabica thrown in to improve the flavour.

The Mareeba Coffee Estate's high quality blend is to be roasted and packaged by the brothers themselves because they wanted to be sure the quality was maintained throughout the process.

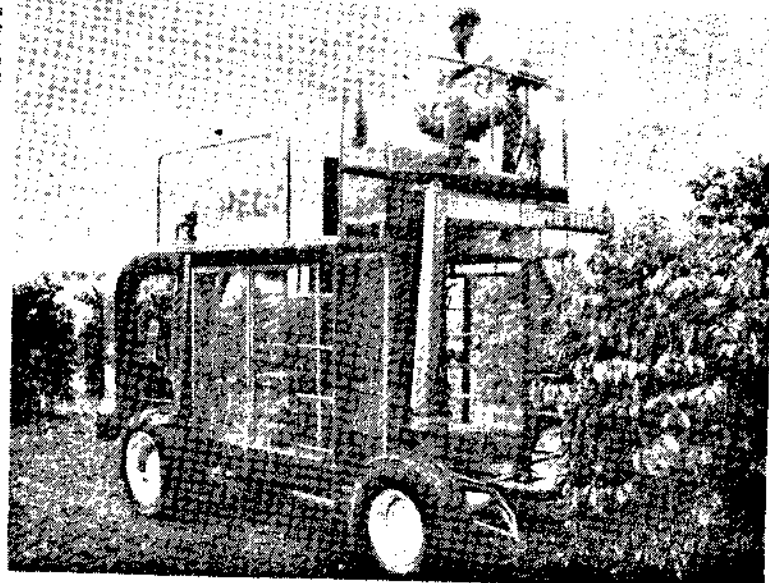
Ranging from 100 per cent Australian coffee to coffee blends the whole Jaques range will be available through gourmet, speciality outlets, general retail outlets and the food service industry.

At this stage they are not going to produce instant coffee because that will involve having to build a \$5-6 million factory and they don't want to commit themselves to that kind of expenditure (yet).

However, there are plans to turn part of the operation into a tourist venture, but Dick Jaques said they didn't expect to move into that area for another two years or so.

"We haven't really drawn up any plans yet and we certainly haven't coated it yet," he said.

"It would cost something like \$500,000 to do it properly, building a restaurant, a gift shop and other facilities. But we are certainly looking at it."



Mechanical coffee harvesting... the secret to the Jaques' Brothers' success. Dick Jaques is driving and brother Nat is watching closely from behind.

SOLANO'S RESTAURANT

Lunch Menu
3 Courses \$15

STARTERS
French Onion Soup
1 Doz. Oysters Natural
Pate Maison
Smoked Salmon
Cantaloup Promenade
Chicken Liver in Madeira Sauce
with Rice
Lamb Kidneys Rosemary
Tomato Sauce
Beef in Burgundy Sauce

MAIN COURSE
Grilled New Zealand Perch in Lobster Sauce
Chicken Noctules Velouté
Roast Lamb in Coriander Sauce
Veal Cordun Bleu
Piper Perri Pepper Steak
Victorian Ramp Steak

DESSERT
Fruit Salad Andalusian
Bavarian Cheese Cake
Three Sorbets
Coffee

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