

ENTERPRISE THE FLAVOR OF THE MONTH FOR NORTHERN GROWERS



DICK JAQUES, left, and his brother, Nat ... "There's no chance of imported coffee being as totally fresh as ours."

It's the end of coffee drought

The Jaques Brothers of North Queensland are the first to break the 50-year-old drought of coffee growing in Australia.

On their 77 ha Mareeba estate, one of the most automated coffee farms in the world, they produce top quality coffee straight from the trees to the pack.

"The fresher the coffee, the better the taste," say Dick and Nat Jaques. "There's no chance of imported coffee being as totally fresh as ours."

They can pick the coffee with their mechanical harvester and have it roasted and packed for consumption with their sophisticated machinery in just 60 hours. The farm could be maintained by only two people.

Coffee was first grown in Australia at the turn of the century. More than 150 ha was planted with coffee then, mainly in the Kuranda, Bingil Bay and Buderim areas.

It was then that Australian coffee gained an international reputation for high quality.

Unfortunately, a number of political and climatic setbacks caused the industry to fold and it is only in recent years that the necessary technology has been developed to overcome the main drawback, labor cost.

The Jaques have been the first to take advantage of applying this technology to coffee farming.

They grew up on their parents coffee farm in Tanzania, East Africa.

Having a long association with coffee farming enabled them to see the pitfalls of the old system, improve upon it and add new ideas of their own.

"We feed the 240,000 coffee trees with fertilizer made up of nine different nutrients twice a week and we monitor the fertilising in the leaf and the trees to ensure optimum levels of nutrients are maintained," Dick said.

He said that in third world countries most coffee was grown by peasants who did not have money to buy fertilizer and the coffee plant missed out on nutrients in one way or another.

He said their trees had no serious coffee disease.

"It's a matter of genetics: if it's good stock it will produce good and healthy offspring, which in turn have to be brought up the proper way," he said.

"We planted coffee arabica — generally regarded as the best for its flavor — and we nurtured our seedlings into healthy trees with the end result being good coffee."

While there is talk of imported coffee going up in price, Dick said their coffee price would remain the same.

Moderation

In defence of coffee's bad publicity on health grounds, Dick said coffee like anything else could be harmful if taken in excess.

"It's a question of drinking it in moderation," he said.

"Australian coffee drinkers are becoming more discerning in their taste and good coffee is going ahead in leaps and bounds."

Naturally the Jaques brothers hope their coffee will do the same. Dick's main responsibility will be the management of Jaques Brothers' Coffee, and Nat's will be the Mareeba Coffee Estate.

On Tuesday, Dick will be in Brisbane to host "The Great Australian Coffee Cruise" on board the Captain Cook cruising restaurant for the launching of Jaques Brothers' Australian Coffee.

Tea crop to give sugar needed aid

Tea and sugar go together like bread and butter, so it would be fitting if growing tea helped rescue North Queensland's ailing sugar industry.

A few growers outside Innisfail already have taken the gamble. Tea and exotic fruits are on a very short list of alternative crops that growers can turn to in the Super Wet Belt.

Only a few so far have been game enough to turn to tea, which is just as well because the market at this stage is limited. But there are hopes that north Queensland in future could supply much of Australia's tea demand.

It is not a new idea. In 1884, James Cutten, a surveyor, laid out with mathematical precision what was probably Australia's first tea plantation on the Cutten family selection along the banks of Cedar Creek at Bingil Bay, south of Innisfail.

The location was considered perfect: the right climate for tea-growing, high humidity and high annual rainfall but the 1918 cyclone, one of the biggest in Queensland's history, wiped out the Cuttens.

Diversified

In 1958 interest in tea growing was revived with the establishment of Nerada, a plantation 25 km west of Innisfail and the building of a modern tea factory in the early 70s.

Four farmers on the Atherton and one at Cape Tribulation Tableland who diversified from dairy farming have been augmenting Nerada's own plantations and the company has issued another five licences to grow tea, four of them to cane farmers.

The marketing director at Nerada, Mr Rod Taylor, says Nerada is aiming at supplying 10 percent of Australia's tea consumption.

One cane grower who tried tea, Frank Darveniza of South Johnstone, last week was busy gathering 1.5 tonne of tea seeds from old tea trees, ready to plant 30 ha with tea at the end of the month.

His family sent cane to the South Johnstone mill when it first opened in 1917 and Darveniza is sticking to sugar but has been experimenting with other crops since 1980.

He will have a commercial crop of rambutan, a fruit native to south-east Asia and related to lychees, by next year.

"I could see clouds gathering for sugar so I looked around so as not to have all my eggs in one basket," he said.

"Exotic fruits are a good prospect. Half our migrants now come from South-east Asia and they aren't interested in grapes and pears."

THE JAQUES families (left): from left, Dick Jaques, Dick's son David and his wife Mariolyn, Nat Jaques, Nat's sons Jason and Robert, and his wife Linda.



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Artery problem