

Our new coffee may give rivals grounds for complaint

MOVE over Blue Mountain, make way Mocha. Mareeba is here.

Australians can now greet the day with fresh roasted locally grown coffee for the first time in nearly a century.

The crop comes from Northern Queensland where Dick and Nat Jaques, who learned the coffee business in Tanzania, have 24,000 coffea arabica plants in production.

They are aiming at the upper end of the market of high-quality, pre-packaged ground coffee.

"We can see our fields from our roasting shed," they boast, noting that their beans are roasted, ground and sealed on the spot. Coffee, if permitted to breathe after roasting, begins to deteriorate immediately.

The Jaques brothers claim to produce "the freshest coffee in the world — bar none".

At a recent tasting, their brand was misjudged as Kenya AA, but they aren't complaining. Kenya AA is considered one of the best beans in the world.

Five years ago the brothers took up a 77ha lease under the Queensland Lands Department's pioneer project after studying the weather patterns of the Atherton Tablelands for the past 50 years.

They are retracing history. The area supported a thriving coffee industry in the early 1900s but labor costs eventually made coffee farming uneconomic.

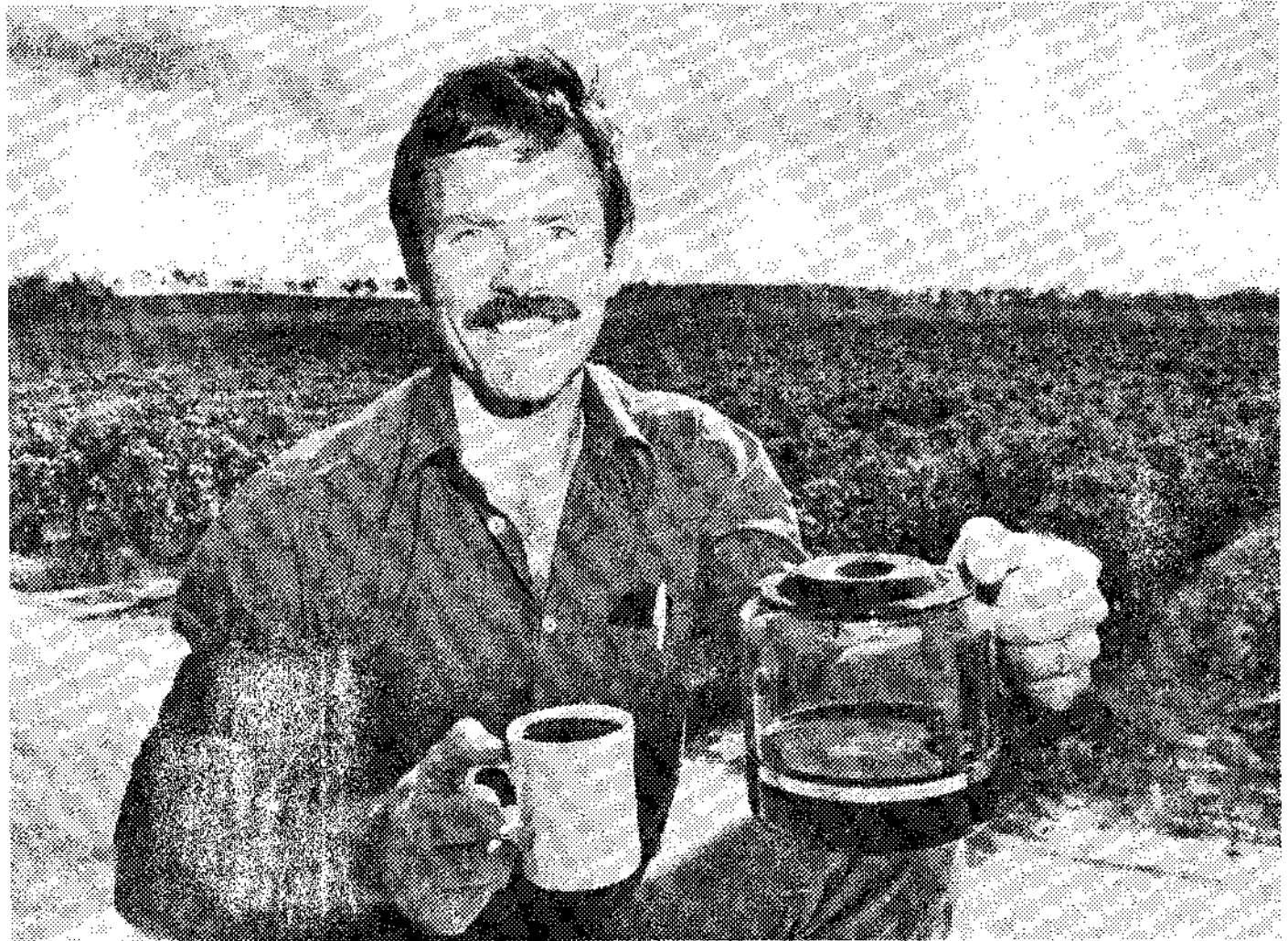
The Jaques believe that modern hydroponic and mechanical farming will enable them to beat the odds.

Instead of an irregularly ripening crop, hand-picked, they are banking on an extensive underground application of fertilisation and irrigation to control fruiting and instead of hand-picking by teams of laborers, the brothers have adapted a New Zealand berry-picker which shakes the ripe berries from the bushes before they are pulped and prepared.

Other farmers have begun planting small coffee acreages and although the crop is not expected to have international impact, Australian coffee may reach the gourmet trade.

Australia imports more than 30,000 tonnes of green beans annually for roasting, blending and packaging by local companies, although 75 per cent of the nation's coffee drinkers are tagged as "instant" drinkers.

Recent surveys show there is a marked increase in the consumption of drip filter coffee and it is estimated that there are some 800,000 coffee machines in daily use.



Dick Jaques enjoys his own brew at his coffee plantation near Mareeba in Queensland — Picture: NEIL DUNCAN