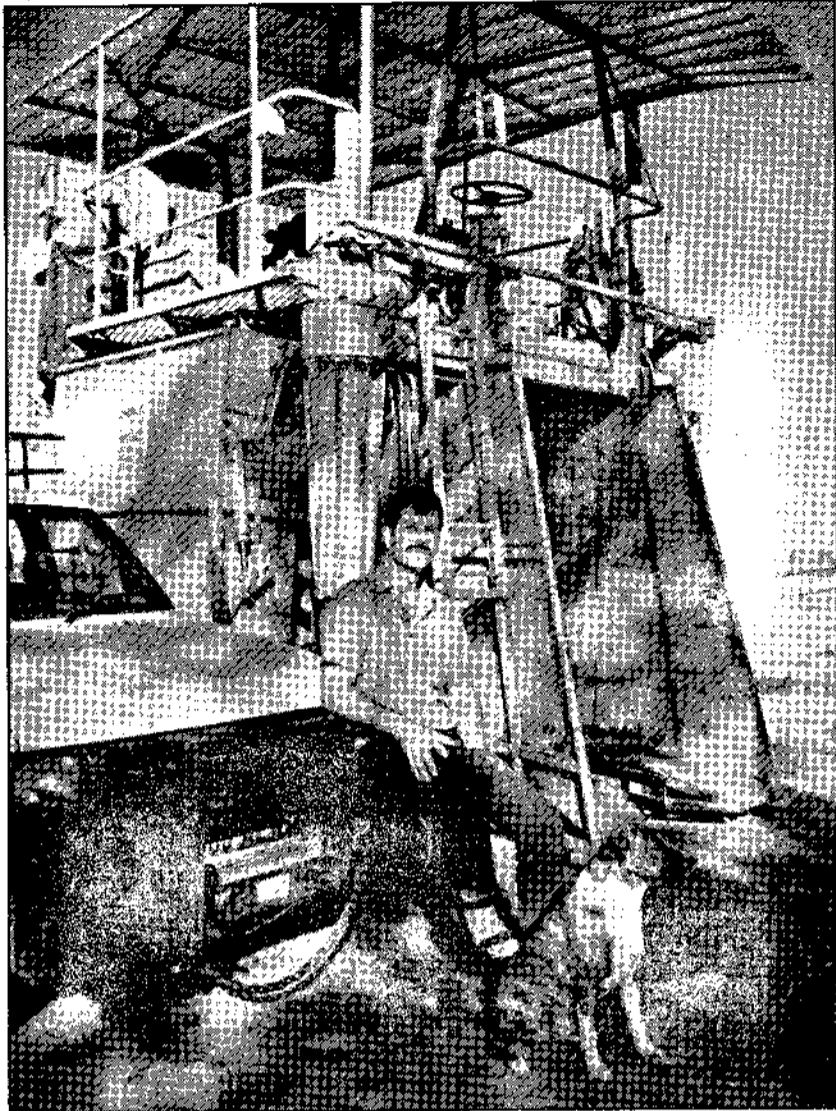


Persistence pays off for Tableland coffee grower

By IAN FRAZER



Nat Jaques with his coffee harvester and wet processing plant at Emerald Creek, Mareeba. The plant was built from second hand parts.

A THERTON Tableland coffee grower Nat Jaques is back in limited production, eight years after the collapse of his pioneering venture near Mareeba.

He has recently completed the first harvest of his new, 50,000-tree plantation at Emerald Creek, about 10km east of Mareeba. He reports a yield of a couple of tonnes from the two to three-year-old trees and is looking forward to a 20-tonne crop next year.

It's been a busy dry season. In between contract harvesting for other growers, Nat and his 16-year-old son Jason have been travelling the North Queensland show circuit to promote their blended, Emerald brand of roasted coffee. He has also completed a gravity-fed wet-processing plant for next year's crop and is now working on modifying a huller to produce parchment coffee.

A never-say-die improviser, he has built the processing plant from mostly second-hand materials, including the final drive from an old Case tractor in the pulper.

He and his brother Dick needed some inventive flair when establishing their plantation at Paddy's Green 17 years ago, despite having learnt coffee-growing from their father in

Tanzania.

For that matter, their parents Bill and Anne Jaques had also begun from scratch. Bill Jaques, a former London policeman, discovered Africa during the war and returned to try pyrethrum farming in Tanzania. Later he switched to coffee.

Nat took over managing the family plantation in 1971 after graduating in agriculture from London University. Six years later, he and his wife, Linda, emigrated to Australia, where Dick was already well established.

The brothers and their wives decided to go into partnership as coffee growers on the Tableland, with encouragement from various State departments. At the time the government was looking for alternatives to tobacco growing in the Mareeba-Dimbulah irrigation area and the Lands Department made available a 65ha special lease at Paddy's Green.

The brothers knew coffee would grow, both from archival records and a neglected stand of bushes at the DPI's Kairi research station, near Tolga. Gerhardt Windhaus grew coffee at Atherton in the early part of the century until the scrub which sheltered his bushes was burnt out.

While all this was encouraging, Nat knew harvesting would have to be mechanised somehow for their venture to succeed. He had struggled to capitalise on good seasons on his father's plantation, despite its permanent staff of 60 and another 300 to 400 casuals for the harvest. Large quantities of berries dropped and were wasted.

"It was difficult to find adequate labour and despite lower wages harvesting costs were one of the greatest expenses. It was my dream to be able to grow coffee and mechanically harvest it."

While in Sydney he saw automated beach and street cleaners in action and wondered if coffee beans could be somehow swept and vacuumed. Later he obtained a New Zealand-built berry picker and decided to try to marry the three devices.

"I felt that given modification it could do the job so we decided to venture forth and plant 100 acres of coffee, with five years to iron out the bugs."

As it happened they were tested by everything but bugs in the coming seven years, culminating with Cyclone Winifred which turned a perfect crop into a wasteland of fallen berries.

Along the way they planted out 80,000 seedlings raised from Papua New Guinean and Australian seed, battled with White Eye which under irrigation had changed from a harmless weed into a woody, coffee tree-engulfing bush, installed 120km of poly pipe, and had a harvester custom-built by the NQEA shipbuilding yard in Cairns.

This new harvester, developed with government assistance, replaced the hybrid berry picker which failed to cope with their first two crops. It was ready in time for the 1986 harvest, but was thwarted by Cyclone Winifred, which hit the Cairns-Innisfail coast in January, 1986.

By then the Jaques brothers were struggling to meet loan

repayments, with interest rates having risen from 12.5 percent to 17.5pc and compounded to 22pc.

A successful harvest in 1987 came too late to save the business, which private investors also had equity in by then. The plantation was liquidated in 1988, to clear a \$1.4 million debt.

With time to spare, Nat obtained an owner-builders' licence and built the family a home in Mareeba. Then he rejoined the coffee industry. He built himself a roaster and began buying in green coffee from other Tableland growers, roasting and blending it and selling it for the going rate of \$12 a kilogram. He regained use of the harvester which had been repossessed but not sold and began contract harvesting.

Nat worked hard with the aim of growing coffee again if the chance arose. His wife groaned and brother, Dick, said 'enough was enough' when he put in a bid for one of eight blocks of Crown land auctioned at Emerald Creek four years ago.

"When you feel what you've done is correct, going into liquidation is a tough pill to swallow," Nat said. "I felt our ideas on coffee production were well founded and decided, using the experience I'd accumulated, to give it another go."

He set up camp, spent six months clearing the bush, started a nursery, and laid out poly pipes to irrigate 50,000 trees from the Tinaroo Dam water supply. The first fruits of all this labour are now bagged up awaiting roasting.

While satisfied with progress so far, Nat believes the government could foster increased coffee production by introducing a 100pc user-pays system for water from the Tinaroo Dam. He says the up-front fee for water rights is a heavy burden for producers like himself waiting to get crops into production.

In his case he has decided to relinquish 140 megalitres of his 240 megalitre annual water right until he is able to expand production. But it's Catch 22 because he will be unable to expand without more water.

"Australia imports 39,000 tonnes of coffee a year worth \$200 million," he said. "For each kilogram of locally produced coffee some foreign exchange is saved. If any government is interested in encouraging new industry it can give incentives. The hardest thing we've had in pioneering this business is lack of income while waiting to bring trees into production and having to pay for your whole water right before you have any production is stupid. If these guys would adopt a policy of user-pays for all farmers they would help us all."

Nat estimates Australia would need 12,000ha of coffee to become self-sufficient. At present the Tableland's 10 growers have about 500ha in production and sell their product in Japan, Europe and the United States as well as on the Melbourne and Sydney markets. The average international price for green coffee is \$4 per kilogram and \$12 for roasted coffee. Nat is aiming for green coffee sales to the highest bidder when in full production.