

COFFEA ARABICA FROM ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

“The exclusivity of St Helena coffee is second to none in the gourmet coffee market”, claimed Tony Wild of Taylor’s Tea & Coffee of York, England, after he had secured the Island’s entire coffee crop for the next three years.

This may not make more than 100,000 cups a year but will delight the connoisseur for St Helena grows some of the finest coffee in the world. Production has been almost totally neglected this century, however, so the revival of this once-famous variety has taken the experts by surprise.

The story behind this welcome enterprise has not been published on the Island, so it is difficult to find the facts, but it seems that Agricultural Officer Mike Holland set to work on the coffee groves of Sandy Bay until he was ready to send samples to prospective purchasers. By then, his tour of duty was up, apparently, but unknown to him, his successor, Vince Hart, was able to clinch the present deal while on leave in April. Should this story prove apocryphal, at least I can vouch for the historical record.

St Helena owes its coffee, like so much else, to the East India Company. In 1733 the Island received a supply of berries from the Company’s agent at Mocha and from these are descended the plants which, for two-and-a-half centuries, could have produced some of the finest coffee in the world. Unfortunately, the landowners and farmers of St Helena preferred trade to tillage so that the coffee plants were rarely tended and not always cropped. Observant visitors frequently deplored the neglect of the Islands’ excellent coffee.

At the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, however, St Helena coffee had its moment of triumph. Colonial Office retrenchment after 1834 caused some landowners to seek new sources of income. Among the more enterprising was G.W. Alexander, whose Bamboo Grove estate in Sandy Bay had coffee trees awaiting cultivation. By 1845, his coffee was being marketed so successfully in London that it earned a 1d premium over all competitors. Thus encouraged, he entered a sample at the Great Exhibition - and took first prize! St Helenians have never forgotten the honour.

Other landowners now began to exploit their coffee and the product’s reputation spread even to Paris after Napoleon’s house at Longwood became French in 1858. But by end of the century, with many enterprising St Helenians and settlers having left the poverty-stricken Island, the cultivation of coffee had long ceased, although some was still picked. By the 1930s, plants were neither pruned nor picked, but after the Second World War, Agricultural Officer Norman Humphrey planned to revive production. When his project was abandoned “on expert advice” in 1962, however, it looked as if the fate of St Helena’s 250-year-old legacy from Mocha was finally sealed.

There must be a story worth telling behind this year's unexpected revival of St Helena coffee production and if I can find the facts, I will put them in print for the record. Meanwhile, let us rejoice, not only because St Helena has revived a traditional source of income, but because a top-quality product that was "lost" is now found.

St Helena coffee is described as "smooth, with a hint of sweetness and acidity and the richness associated with coffee from other volcanic islands, such as Java and Sumatra". It is retailed exclusively by Bettys, of Harrogate, N. Yorks, United Kingdom at £1.56 per quarter pound, or £9.20 per pound, by post, plus p & p.

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