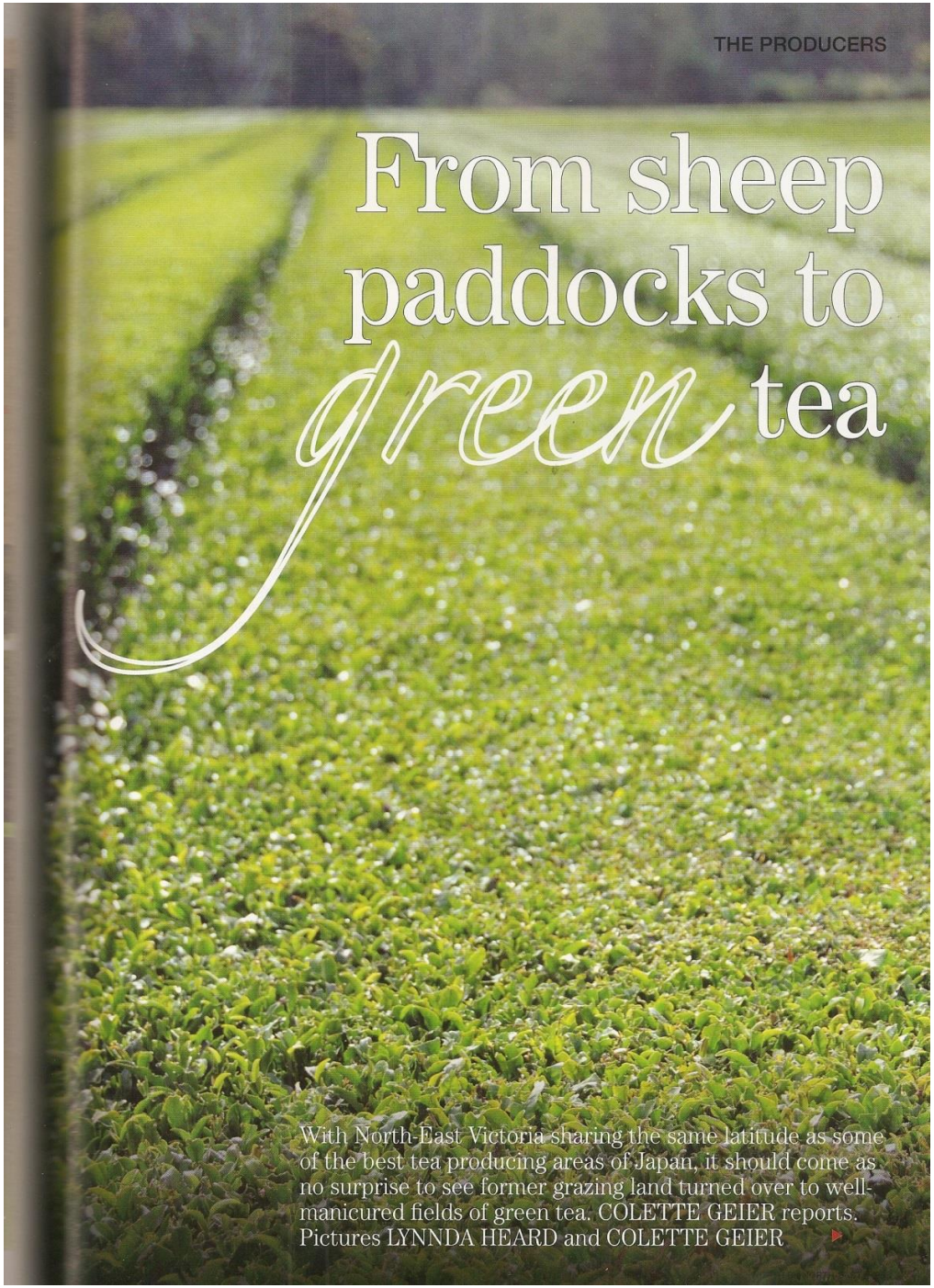
From sheep paddocks to green tea



With North-East Victoria sharing the same latitude as some of the best tea producing areas of Japan, it should come as no surprise to see former grazing land turned over to well-manicured fields of green tea. COLETTE GEIER reports. Pictures LYNNDA HEARD and COLETTE GEIER

'Tea's tannins create a natural defence against pests, removing the need for nasty chemicals"

Green tea consumption in Japan might not be the major issue on the lips of many locals, but for Will and Georgie Leckey of Acheron, it's a big deal.

Some 20 years ago, tea producers in Japan faced a new problem. Sales of bottled green tea had skyrocketed and demand for tea was destined to outstrip production.

Prepared green tea is bigger than Coca Cola in Japan and is still growing so although the demand for leaf tea had not risen, Japan was running out of tea.

Back in Victoria, the state government and local councils were eagerly looking for new agricultural initiatives and the Japanese green tea predicament was a godsend.

A consortium of Japanese tea producers visited the state and studies began into different areas' suitability for tea production.

Numerous sites around the world from China to New Zealand were investigated, but it was North-East Victoria that ticked the most boxes with a clean and green image and being on the same latitude as some of Japan's better growing regions.

The name Ito En is synonymous with Japanese tea holding 38 per cent of the market share and the company was the first to pack green tea in cans and bottles. In the late 1990's Ito En set up a trial plot in Rubicon near Alexandra and so began the production of green tea in the North-East.

By 2000, the trials had proved successful and Ito en, with the help of the Murrindindi Shire started looking for potential local producers.

At the time, Will and Georgie were farming grain and grazing sheep and were looking to diversify. With the exorbitant local land prices and their access to irrigation, and the rich topsoil on their share of the Goulburn river flats, they were looking for something intensive so as to remove the need to find more land. They had researched grapes and turf as potential crops, but tea offered something different.

Ito En offered a high degree of support with propagation and general agronomy for growers and the high level of mechanisation in modern tea production promised far lower labour costs than other crops. Tea's tannins create a natural defence against pests, removing the need for nasty chemicals and even sheep can be grazed alongside the plantation with no risk of destruction.

Glimpsing the Leckey's tea plantation for the first time is like falling through the looking glass. The traditional grazing and broad acre landscape of the Acheron area gives way to 12 hectares of lush emerald shrubbery with all the precision and perfection of a Zen garden. The manicured rows with their gentle camber sit like a perfect patch of green silk corduroy on a sheet of rough hessian.

Camellia Sinensis, the bush from which we make tea, is a hardy evergreen camellia shrub, native to China. It grows to roughly a metre tall, has a root system to match and can live for over 40 years. Tea is produced by snapping off the young shoots (which break at a certain point much like asparagus) and processing them in several different ways.

The difference in black tea and green tea is not the variety of bush it comes from, but the way the leaves are processed once picked.

Black tea is fermented whereas green tea is not. Due to the delicate nature of tea tips and their high moisture content, tea begins to ferment very rapidly after picking and this is where green tea is far more susceptible to damage than its black counterpart.

The leaves are picked and packed into refrigerated and ventilated containers for transport to the processing facility. Green tea has only 12 hours in which to be processed in order to ensure fermentation does not occur.

In 2004, Ito En opened a multi-million dollar processing plant in Wangaratta and it now processes 1350 tonnes of tea leaves each year producing 310 tonnes of finished product. Of this only five tons will be sold domestically and the rest will be sent to Japan or the US.

Harvest runs from October till April with each plant being picked two to three times. Each pick has a different name and different qualities – the highest being Shincha or 'first flush' tea produced with the first pick of the season. Shincha is rich in flavonoids

and relatively low in tannins, which intensify with increased exposure to UV light over the course of the summer.

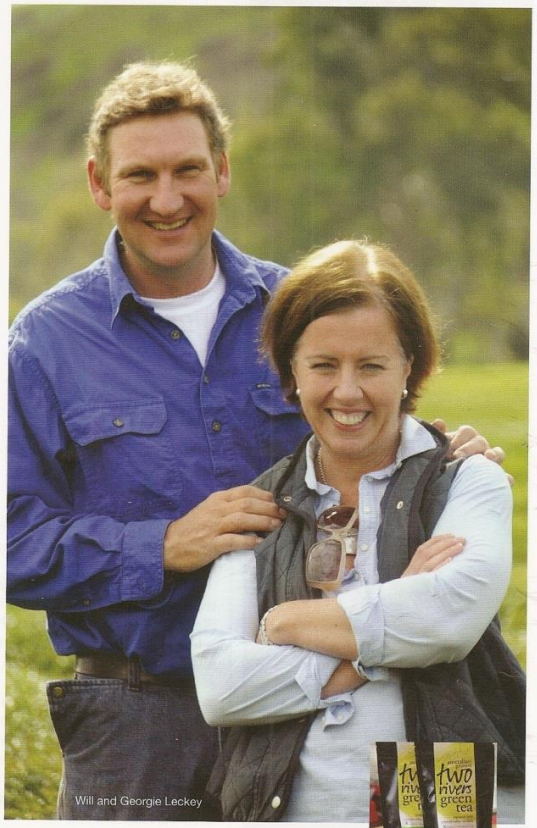
The delicacy of the spring shoots is also the biggest headache for tea farmers. The new growth is highly susceptible to frost damage and the Leckeys have installed sophisticated pop up sprinkler systems to help combat late spring frosts.

The Wangaratta plant processes tea from as far north as Mt Beauty and the Kiewa Valley and south as far as Acheron and Alexandra from nine producers on 11 different farms.

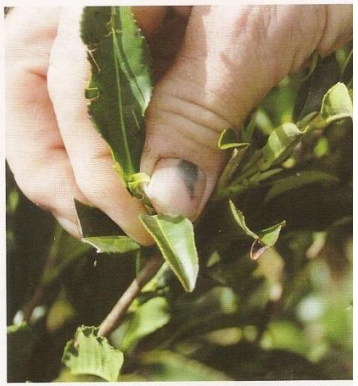
Inside the factory is a very different world. Rows of complex and intricate machinery gently heat, rub and fan the tea like thousands of robotic hands while the heat and steam through the delicate leaves fills the air thick with the smells of an English garden. Tea has been processed like this in Japan for over 100 years and although mechanised, the factory maintains a timeless almost antique quality. The drying process takes roughly four and a half hours and takes the tea from 72 per cent moisture right down to between two to five per cent in the finished product. Heat and steam is used to arrest enzymatic oxidation and lock in the fresh clean flavours of fine green tea. It's not just the delicate flavours and aromas that are captured with this process; all tea contains powerful antioxidants, but green tea has been shown to contain far higher levels of Epigallocatechin gallate a potent antioxidant known as EGCG.

Each batch is constantly monitored, tested and recorded to ensure quality and meticulously packaged and then cooled once more to ensure freshness.

Peter Anderson, production manager for Ito En Australia in Wangaratta, has been a part of the company since it opened in 2004 and he and a team ▶



Will and Georgie Leckey



"All tea contains powerful antioxidants, but green tea has been shown to contain far higher levels"

of highly trained specialists spend hours each day testing and monitoring the tea though its different stages.

When buying premium tea, any good tea aficionado will warn against making Shincha tea with water over 70°c as it releases too many tannins creating a bitter brew, but all tea at Ito en is tested at 100°c.

"It's about creating a worst case scenario," explains Ito En tea maker Paul Sandford. "It's no good testing it at 70°c if someone is going to take it home and make it with boiling water. We have to know they're going to get a decent brew no matter what."

Tea's delicate flavour profile means it is very susceptible to contamination and in Australia that poses a major problem. Gum leaves with their high and pungent oil levels are a major headache for tea producers with just one leaf being clearly discernable in a batch of tea weighing several tonnes. Rows are inspected and individual leaves removed by hand before the tea is harvested. Adding a gum leaf to the billy may make for an authentic swaggie tea around a campfire, but it imparts little pleasure to a delicate cup of fine Japanese green tea.

This degree of precision, however, is exactly what makes the Leckey's Two Rivers tea so special. Will receives samples from each individual batch produced from his plants and is able to pick the eyes out of it to market under the Two Rivers brand.

Like growing grapes for wine production, the soil aspect and conditions of each row provides subtle differences to growing conditions and Will can choose specific rows from each pick to blend for their premium tea blends.

As more locals discover these beautiful teas produced right at our own back door, demand is growing but it's coming from further afield as well. Japan's recent nuclear crisis has Japanese tea enthusiasts from around the world seeking safe alternatives and Will is sending tea all around the world to discerning customers.

But after almost a decade of Japanese green tea being grown in the region, are we likely to see the Leckeys extend their plantings and more producers joining the trend? Probably so, but it is unlikely to happen overnight. With the current strength of the Australian dollar coupled with the downturn experienced internationally, local tea producers face the same battles as other local farmers competing on an international stage. These are tough times for producers, bu as the economic climate stabilises and we continue to understand the amazing health-giving properties of green tea, demand is destined to grow and these little pockets of Japanese agrarian oase are sure to spread across our landscape

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