

# Australian Tea Growers Are Keen on Green

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*Mangrove Mountain in New South Wales was first planted in 2004. Photo courtesy John Robb*

Australia is recognised, worldwide, for its quality products, as well as green and clean practices. Green tea, however, is not the first thing that comes to mind when talking about exported produce.

Around 20 years ago Japanese tea companies were looking for a place to grow their tea during the off season. Working with the Australian government, several test plantations were set up using Japanese tea varieties.

The tea was processed using Japanese processing methods, exported and then sold in Japan where it was marketed under Japanese brands. There are several Australian plantations still under contract to produce good quality sencha style tea for the Japanese market.

Recently, a growing number of Australian tea companies have incorporated some of

this tea into their own collections for the Australian market. Although Australia

produces less than 1% of the tea consumed worldwide, the federal government recently provided a \$100,000 grant to the Australian Green Tea Cooperative to promote the burgeoning industry. There are now 20 commercial gardens in the country with plans for more.



*Fermentation cabinet at Arakai Tea.*

*Photo courtesy Arakai Tea.*

Mangrove Mountain in New South Wales has an ideal climate and was one of the first places planted for the original pilot program.

“Over the course of time, the competitive advantages that this area had have disappeared or been reduced through international trade, or other areas that could produce these crops more effectively, and cheaper prices,” farmer John Robb told SBS. “So, it’s put a big strain on this region, from an agricultural point of view, over the last 50 or 60 years,” he said. Robb is a horticulturist who specializes in Camellias and has travelled the world extensively to research tea production. He is a founding member of the Australian Green Tea Pty Ltd, Austea CoOp and the AUSTEA brand.

In 2004, the area caught the attention of the Japanese tea company Kunitaro, which had been searching for new land to meet a growing demand for green tea in its home country.

“Fourteen years on, the farm is no longer just an experiment but a thriving business and a new source of pride for the community. The owners have expanded the farm to double the size of the original plantation,” writes SBS.

The farm has established a counter-seasonal market for Japanese drinkers that coincides with the lucrative gift-giving period of Christmas and the New Year. The five-hectare farm produces up to 20 metric tons of tea a year. Once the leaves are harvested, they go through a small-scale processing facility before shipment to Japan for further processing and packaging.



Arakai Tea makes both black and green artisan teas. Photo courtesy Arakai Tea. You can now find large tea farms on the Somersby Plateau, along the NSW Central Coast, in South West Victoria and Queensland. There are also commercial plantations in Western Australia. The most southern tea plantation in the world is in Tasmania where **Dry Ideas** began growing tea for the Japan market in 1990.

Robb, of AUSTEA says that if his vision comes true one day the NSW Central Coast will be covered with lush tea plantations.

Our 'Southern Hemisphere' unique terroir and production cycle, combined with Australia's 'clean & green' approach gives Australian farmers the advantage, when supplying fresh products into the growing Northern Hemisphere markets, according to Robb.

Several new initiatives have recently been put into place, including the Australian Green Tea Pty Ltd (AGTPL) a private tea trading and consultancy, which propagates tea plants specifically for plantations in Australia.

Additionally, the AGTPL is also one of the founding members of the **AUSTEA** Cooperative. Both the AGTPL and AUSTEA Co-op, were created to act as catalysts in the set-up, education, and development of this industry and its potential farmers; assisting farmers who are interested to make a smooth transition from other crops, into tea, he explains.

A new branch of AUSTEA has been designed with the sole purpose of supporting and showcasing, a carefully curated collection of the best Australian teas. A successful case is **Arakai Estate**, in Queensland. This award-winning artisan tea company produces green tea and black tea using Taiwanese processing methods.

Frank Sammut, a board member of Regional Development Australia Central Coast, told SBS he believes green tea could be a major export crop for Australian farmers one day:

“China’s the biggest tea exporter, and we’ll be competing with them, but I think where we have to look at our point of difference is around that clean, green food production which Australia’s known for,” he said.

Source: AUSTEA, SBS