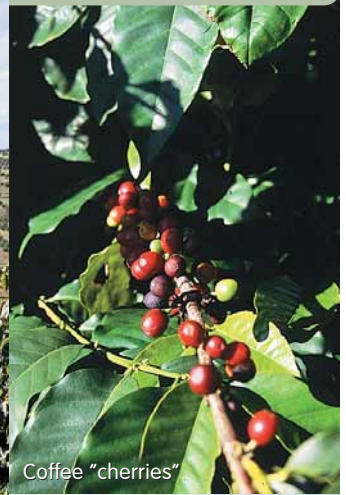


COFFEE

Words **Andy Shea** Photography **Emma Ventura**



Zentveld's coffee plantation



Coffee "cherries"

Home of the perfect bean



ON THE NSW NORTH COAST THEY'RE WAKING UP TO SMELL THE COFFEE ROAST – AND IT'S HOME-GROWN GOOD.

Something grabs your attention when you drive through the gently undulating hinterland of the northern NSW town of Ballina. It's not just the dramatic vista of subtropical rainforest meeting the Pacific, although this is impressive, especially when southern right and humpback whales are frolicking about 50 metres offshore. Natural wonders aside, it is the lush and verdant plantations that have you craning your neck as you meander through the area's winding back roads.

Fruit and sugarcane farming abounds. Everything from avocados and guavas to macadamias and custard apples are grown here in rich alluvial soils that have been farmed since the mid-1800s. But it's a new kid in the crop that is fast securing this quiet backwater (just down the road from the brashness of Byron Bay) a boiling hot reputation.

This relative newcomer is coffee, and the North Coast roasters are changing

the international perception of how and where the coffee bean can be grown.

"In many respects we're in paradise," says Rebecca Zentveld, roast mistress at Zentveld's, one of Australia's largest bean producers and roasters, and the undisputed king of the Ballina Shire coffee hills. "We have amazing soil, a glorious climate and our trees are disease-free, which is a huge bonus for the industry here. It all makes for the perfect bean and a great cup of coffee."

Located on 20ha of prime agricultural land on the hills framing Ballina, and boasting some 35,000-plus arabica trees, Zentveld's is a pioneer in an industry that has sometimes struggled to be taken seriously by overseas buyers.

"Australia is not known for its coffee production," Zentveld says. "We're very good drinkers of it, but the majority of the coffee we drink is roasted in Italy and grown in either Colombia, Vietnam or Kenya. There's a misconception that

coffee can't be grown in low-lying areas in a subtropical climate. We've shown the world that it can and that when it's done right, it's as good as anything else out there. What we lose in altitude we more than make up for in latitude."

The Zentveld's plantation has grown coffee trees since 1987, but the business didn't fully take off until 1993 when Rebecca, tired of drinking her way around Melbourne's cafes, decided that it was time for her and husband, John, to help out his parents on the farm – and produce their very own coffee brand.

"This is one of the major agricultural and growing areas in the country," she says. "We knew we could make the plantation work with a bit of hard work and luck. Looking at the crop today, it's been well worth the toil."

While hard work has certainly played a part in the company's award-winning success, the local climate has proved to be a major asset. >

“There are three major benefits,” Zentveld says. “The fruit, or ‘cherries’ as we call them, ripen slower to produce a high-quality, dense bean with a distinctively sweet and full flavour. The trees also produce less caffeine [which is a defence mechanism] as they are not affected by diseases or pests normally associated with tropical climates. Finally, because of the lack of pests, we use no pesticides or sprays on the trees, so our crop is as natural as it can be.”

According to Zentveld, coffee production is similar to winemaking in its complexities, but has more potential for things to go wrong.

“The grind of the roasted bean is all-important, as is the manner in which your cup of coffee is made and poured by the barista. Picking the fruit from the trees at the right time is critical. The cherries are

best when they’re in the bright-red to deep-burgundy colour range. When they’re picked we wash them, then the cherries are pulped to remove the coffee beans. The beans are then dried. When the moisture in them has been reduced from about 60 per cent to 12 per cent, I roast them.”

Rebecca’s craft and skill at roasting has helped Zentveld’s collect nine medals at the annual Royal Agricultural Society Fine Food Show Awards and elevate the company to the top of the list when it comes to coffee roasting in Australia.

“We want to be the best coffee producer in the country,” she says. “I believe we’re getting there.”

For further information call Zentveld’s Coffee on (02) 6687 2045 or visit www.zentvelds.com.au

THE ROAST MISTRESS’S TIPS FOR PERFECT PLUNGER COFFEE

- Buy your coffee as you would vegetables – fresh and often
- Store coffee in an airtight container
- Buy whole-bean coffee instead of ground (invest in a grinder)
- Use at least one rounded dessertspoon per cup
- Use water that is just off the boil. Boiling water scalds the grains, producing bitter coffee
- Stir for a few seconds. Replace plunger lid, leave to brew for two minutes, then slowly push the plunger down



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