

# Aussies grow coffee too

**P**ractically organic, Australian coffee thrives in our cooler subtropical conditions, free of the pests and diseases that require nasty sprays in most coffee growing nations. Our growers use biological and sustainable farming practices, such as composting and mulching all coffee tree trimmings, fruit skins, and parchment from processing, and then feed it back into the trees to cool the soil, inhibit weeds, and feed the worms.

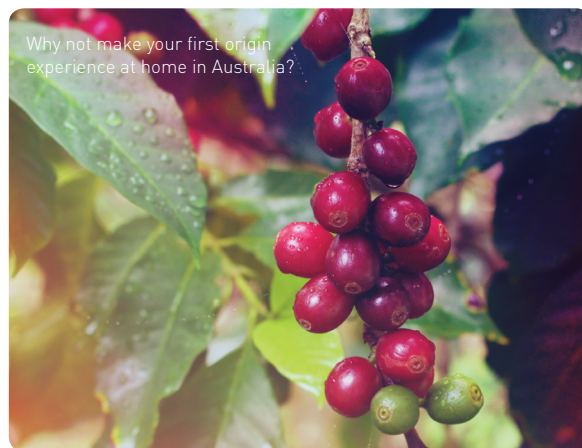
Ground covers are planted, organic fertilisers are increasingly chosen, and rainforest and creek lines are regenerated with local species. Australia has quite eco-conscious growers and landowners.

Most Australian coffee farms are family owned businesses. Only a few grow more than 20 hectare of coffee. Our supply of coffee is so small that our production would meet less than one per cent of Australian coffee drinkers' lips. Our local beans are rare. So rare, we don't even rank of the production list of the International Coffee Organisation.

We hear of the concerns of international producers who fear for the continuity of their fourth or fifth generation farming practices because the younger generations are lured with city jobs, more money and less labour, and in some parallels, we share a similar reality – we also need more growers.

Growing in cooler climates brings a relatively long fruit development and ripening season for typically 10-months or more. Being based on a farm in the hills behind Byron Bay, I can report that the spring flowering starts in late October after good rain and the ripe cherries are not harvested until the following October/November. So really, that's at least 11 months growth and flavour development of the coffee fruit and the seed within. Those who hand harvest might even start a few weeks earlier, but it all depends on the terroir and the locale of the trees. Some pockets within a plantation receive more winter daily sun or afternoon sun that ripens the fruit quicker than the shadier parts. Rainfall prior to the harvest period also affects the spring harvest timing.

The harvest quantity of last's crop is yet be determined



Why not make your first origin experience at home in Australia?

but we do know the last two harvests of 2015-16 were very small. Why?

Some growers have pruned their trees heavily, others pulled out their older trees, and some have sold their properties, being at the age of deserving "proper" retirement in their 70s. It is unfortunate but true that many a fine viable farm has been sold to non-farmers these past few years. With land values around the picturesque Byron Bay to Gold Coast hinterland being what they have become – expensive – it is no wonder that new landowners paying \$2 million or more don't do so to become working farmers. This has become a real concern. We are losing our finest food growing land to growing houses. That is what happens after an almost 20-year-real estate boom for some of the most viable food growing land in Australia that shows no sign of slowing.

Horticultural land is picturesque, and growers have helped make it so. For the past 30 years, new crops of coffee, macadamia, fruit trees, and bush foods have helped make the countryside more attractive, and helped regenerate rainforest and their creek lines. Farmers have gotten rid of camphors and cleared their creek lines, making our food bowl 'countryside' even more appealing, and more suitably green with local species.

The desire for countryside living is bringing big prices for land that is the most suitable terroir for fine coffee

production and other high value food crops. Add in the fact that it's close to the sea, green, and lush in all seasons with usually reliable rainfall, rich soil, and flowing creeks – have I sold it to you yet? High real estate values are pushing out the growers who helped created such an appealing landscape. If we keep losing the real growers, our landscape will become countrified suburbia – growing houses, not food.

Where will we be if we don't have the growers to grow our coffee and our food? We need to respect our growers, pay a fair premium for quality, and help our growers receive a decent return for their farming investment, and encourage your friends to become growers.

Many roasters and baristas are now familiar with Australia's coffee producing areas, and have come to explore local farms through facilitated visits. For the past two years, the Australian Specialty Coffee Association (ASCA) has run tours of local coffee farms and introduced roasters and baristas to the producers, practices, landscape, and flavours of Australian grown coffee.

The key message is that there's no need to go overseas to visit origin – you can do it right here at home. One such person to partake in these trips is 2016 Australian AeroPress Champion Georgina Lumb.

"The ASCA Barista Camp has been growing and developing since it's inaugural weekend in 2016. Each year has brought new and exciting opportunities for attendees," she says. "It's been a really great experience to be able to go to farms and connect with farmer without have to spend a fortune going overseas. It's given me an invaluable insight into the Australian coffee community and market."

Two years ago Georgina and other ASCA members visited Zeta Grealy's Wirui Estate's coffee farm in Carool, New South Wales, where the group got to see how coffee is harvested and processed. Last year, the camp took a more "open" approach with participating camp members able to interact with locals and engage in different workshops,

which covered topics such as sensory skills, cupping, competition rules, and physical and mental health. Then there's the social advantages and networking aspect of the barista camp too.

"Getting to know baristas, café owners, beverage retailers, business owners and developers from all around the nation is always amazing," Georgina says.

The Australian Subtropical Coffee Association (ASTCA) has a big year ahead. It has been a representative voice for coffee growers in the subtropics of Australia for more than 20 years, and is mid-way through implementing a strategic plan for Australian grown subtropical coffee that covers research, environmentally sustainable farm practices, industry development, quality development, and market engagement.

The most dynamic research project in recent years is ASTCA's partnership with World Coffee Research (WCR) through Southern Cross University in Lismore. It's taking part in a worldwide trial to assess the performance of 35 top-performing coffee varieties from 11 suppliers around the world. The goal is to discover the suitability of these coffee varieties for Australia's subtropical growing conditions.

ASTCA has also founded the first National Reference Panel on coffee biosecurity and in conjunction with Plant Health Australia, a draft national biosecurity plan has been established, with consultation and roll out of the plan to take place over the remainder of 2018. This is a crucial step in ensuring that Australian grown coffee remains disease – and pest – free.

We owe Australian coffee farmers as much as we owe the farmers in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to maintain land that is rich and ripe for coffee growing.

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Zentveld's Coffee Roastery and Plantation in Byron Bay