



# UPTON TEA IMPORTS

*Experts of Loose Leaf Tea Since 1989*

Vol 27 No. 2

Holliston, Massachusetts

Spring, 2018

## DISCOVERING A "NEW-OLD" TEA ORIGIN



**I**t is a rare opportunity in the global galaxy of fine specialty tea to discover a new country-of-origin, especially when it has a story backed by history suitable for a Hollywood script or even a novel. Our beloved tea origins within India, China, Sri Lanka and many other nations are forever the main sources of specialty tea, so it is a special moment when word of a new tea source arises. We are proud to introduce this new tea origin to you: the South American country of Colombia.

Please turn to page 40.

## The Magic of Colombian Tea

-by Brian K.

As a long-time follower of Upton Tea Imports and the tea industry, I am honored to contribute to this issue of the Upton Tea Quarterly. This past year, a fellow tea lover based in the United Kingdom called and asked if I'd ever heard of Bitaco Colombian tea. Intrigued, I noted that not only had I never heard of Bitaco, I did not even know that tea was grown in Colombia. My friend went on to explain that this "new-old" origin, deep in the ancient mountains of Colombia, had an exceptionally colorful history going back decades. As he explained some of the background of this South American tea region, I welcomed his offer to forward samples for my review. I must explain that my "tea friend" is something of a legend within the global tea industry. Nigel Melican travels the globe constantly helping many of the world's premier tea growing nations improve the quality of their tea. For decades, he has been walking through the fields and hills of tea plantations all over the planet, deftly recommending tactics to optimize tea quality: advanced soil conditioning, pruning tactics and post-harvest value addition techniques.

Nigel has been instrumental in the growth of Bitaco Colombian tea for many years. His first visit there was in 1988, and more recently, he led the initiative towards crafting the tea to suit an international demand for long-leaf, specialty teas. When Nigel suggests a new tea, I listen very closely.

As I awaited my "new-old" tea origin samples, I perused the documents that my friend had sent, which covered the germinal roots of this legendary region of Bitaco, Colombia. My imagination widened with every paragraph as I found myself mesmerized to discover – virtually for now – a magical place where lush tea bushes grow abundantly: the mountains of Colombia. I previously thought of coffee – not tea – when mention of the South American country arose in almost any context. I was surprised and delighted to learn that nestled within the heart of one of the planet's most biodiverse regions resides a thriving tea estate! How had this very special place where tea has been growing for decades escape my tea-loving eyes and ears all these years? Before I share more of this splendid discovery, let me roll back the clock a bit with some vital history.

## The Early, Tumultuous Days of Colombian Tea

Tea growing in Colombia began in the 1950s, when the Colombian Department of Agriculture imported tea plants from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to help diversify regional crops. The first trials for tea production on the Bitaco Tea Estate (located high in the west Andes Mountains near a town called Bitaco) were done jointly by two entrepreneurs, Don Joaquin and Don Alberto Llano, using an artisanal style of agriculture that generated impressive results: brilliantly lush leaf growth that produced delicious brewed tea. These humble efforts were the first Colombian loose leaf teas ever produced. They went on to plant 123 acres of *Camellia sinensis* during the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1970s, a period of chaotic political violence overtook Colombia and armed invasions deeply affected the region, and eventually the entire tea company. During this intense period, Don Alberto Llano passed away and the tea operations slid into chaos. The untended tea fields fell into disarray, and the fledgling company was liquidated by the government.

After some years, the surviving family members of the tea company, led by their matriarch,

Mrs. Marichu de Llano, devised a plan to revive and take control of the company – now called Agricola Himalaya. The task was enormous, with neglected tea plants long overgrown, unpruned, and weed-choked. The soil required months of intensive regeneration to build it back to a stable nutritive level. One of the original founder's sons, Alberto Jr., took charge of rebuilding the company, literally from the ground up. Marichu de Llano, a powerful woman, simultaneously promoted the social development of the region through fundraising to improve local education and medical care. From the temporary failures of the regional tea enterprise, a much stronger tea business arose, advancing in all directions under the leadership of Alberto Jr. for the next ten years.

During this period, Alberto Jr. implemented new tea processing styles, installed new equipment, and commercialized flavored and herbal teas. It was at this stage that Nigel first visited to help improve tea quality. The family tea business was flourishing under Alberto Jr.'s skilled guidance when Colombia once again entered a wave of internal tumult and political violence. Alberto Jr. became one of the many victims in

the crossfire of trouble. He left a very positive and legendary impact on the business, both within the local community and his grieving family. While the company mourned his passing, it was time to carry on and rebuild his management team. His mother and six sisters took control of the company and reshaped it as a memorial to their beloved Alberto Jr. During those challenging times, the family bonded together and worked hard. Now, Colombia has a unilateral peace agreement and Agricola Himalaya can focus all of its energy on producing tea.

## A Special Tea Treat Arrives

**T**he Bitaco teas arrived a few days after my conversation with Nigel. After immersing myself for hours in the tumultuous, written history of an exotic, unknown tea region, I was full of added anticipation and lofty expectations as I brewed a large pot of Bitaco Black Tea Leafy (TSA2, found on page 24) loose leaf tea. To my delight, it was wonderfully balanced, brisk and bold as a good black tea should be, with a smooth mouth feel. My delight was heightened as the rich front notes merged with enticing back notes, which offered a subtly sweet

astringency as well as the faintest traces of caramelized sugarcane and spice. According to Nigel's account, this sweetness is present throughout the Bitaco production process, even scenting the air at the tea processing facilities. With each sip, I found that this new tea released more of its deeper personality, its volatile aromatic essences and complex flavor nuances.

After my first trials, my simple tea meditation and musings told me that these teas would resonate with fellow tea lovers wanting more complexity and subtle nuance from their daily tea breaks. These teas enlivened and refreshed me in a gentle and friendly way.

## A New Beginning – A Lush Tea Plantation High in the Andean Mountains

**F**or decades, Agricola Himalaya packaged fine teas that were largely sold in tea bags, with or without flavorings. In the last five years, the company has diversified by planting new acres of tea using unique, locally selected varieties. The strategic intent is to evolve the plantation into a balanced ecospace for cultivating and processing the finest loose leaf specialty tea. The

Bitaco Tea Estate resides alongside the Bitaco Regional Forest Reserve (Reserva Forestal Protectora Regional de Bitaco), a thriving, protected rain forest.

Bitaco Colombian tea is a “high-grown” tea, cultivated at over 6,000 feet above sea level in the mist-capped Andes Mountains in Bitaco, Colombia. The region is characterized by its high level of rainfall and exceptional biodiversity. The Bitaco tea plants thrive in rich, young volcanic soil that naturally promotes lush plant growth; new tea buds and precious top leaf growth, or “flush,” is abundant daily. Being near the Equator - just south of Ecuador - results in a year-round, bountiful harvest. Except for a few weeks annually, the Bitaco tea pluckers harvest the highly desired “two leaves and a bud” from hillsides drenched in misty rain, followed by copious bright sunshine, and enlivened in all directions by every type of wildlife imaginable.

As part of this delightful “new-old” tea origin discovery, I also found it quite interesting that Bitaco tea is harvested by skilled male and female workers, not simply women, as is commonplace in many tea regions worldwide. 32 tea pluckers - 16 women and 16 men

- work together closely in teams, creating a culture of equality and integrity.

## Real-World Sustainability

The pristine and sustainable environment where Colombian teas are grown and harvested is exceptionally rich in minerals, and the tea fields are nourished by pure mountain streams. Colombia is a tropical country with consistent weather throughout the year, allowing Bitaco teams to produce teas year-round. The almost “always sunny” estate location benefits its tea plants with maximum sunshine exposure that promotes photosynthesis and higher levels of natural antioxidants.

The Bitaco Tea Estate is certified as an organic producer, with additional acreage being planted continuously - all for organic tea. Currently, the total acreage of the property is nearly 520 acres: 136 acres for tea cultivation and 245 acres for a natural forest reserve, where the headwaters of more than 8 springs feed into the local watershed. There are also 25 acres for growing herbs (for herbal teas) and 112 acres that will be used for increasing the total tea acreage

during the next 8 years.

The Bitaco Tea Estate and brand has established a non-profit foundation through its parent company - the Agricola Himalaya Foundation - to ensure that local workers and their families have ready access to programs focused on education, especially for children. The benefits that Bitaco provides include improvement of local infrastructure, expansion of recreation facilities, and access to digital technology. The Bitaco region is now fully supported by a bustling local economy further entrenched by the Agricola Himalayan Foundation's funds and support; workshops on ecological education, music, and business are intertwined with the endowment of schools, libraries, and a scholarship fund for higher education. Where peace and tea merge in this situation, the outcome is beneficial in all directions.

Bitaco takes its stewardship duties very seriously, with a reverence for growing tea in such a protected, pristine location. Residing alongside the Bitaco Regional Forest Reserve, the estate sits within a spectacular biological corridor amongst flowing spring waters and lush tree canopy, which supports

one of the most biodiverse places on earth, and includes hundreds of species of birds, amphibians, reptiles and native flora.

## A Bright Future for Colombian Tea

The legacy of Bitaco tea tells a story of the incredible resilience of a peace-loving family who have ardently held to their vision of tea becoming the pathway for a small part of Colombia to build sustainable livelihoods despite endless obstacles.

While the challenging trials and tribulations of the past suggest that the Bitaco Tea Estate vision would end in a "paradise lost" scenario, the resiliency of Agricola Himalaya and its unified family have held together during the toughest of times. They have gone on to shepherd one of the world's up-and-coming origins for fine specialty teas, a "paradise found" tea business revival. And yes, Nigel Melican can take plenty of credit for his keen insights and endless travel from London to Colombia over many years, supporting the evolution of this "new-old" tea producer - Bitaco. As a metaphor between the strength and history I have learned about Bitaco tea, its native population and

the black tea I have sampled and enjoyed: it's strong, brisk and bold, and like the region where it grows, a splendid balance has been reached.

Here at Upton Tea Imports, we are inspired by Brian's story of the Bitaco tea family and their sustainability mission. In keeping with our primary goal to source the finest teas from around the world, we are proud and excited to become the first U.S. purveyor of these Colombian teas. We invite you to explore our new Colombian tea section on page 24 of this Quarterly.