



Coffee Takes on All The Tea In China

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Australian entrepreneur Mr. Richard Wilson has joined an international drive to encourage the Chinese to take up a new drink-coffee.

Persuading a nation of 1.2 billion tea drinkers to take a coffee break is daunting, but the former Melbourne plumber is not deterred. Mr. Wilson, 33, is pursuing the premium end of China's fast-developing coffee market.

Together with American partners Mr. Ron Tompson and Mr. Stuart Eunson, Mr. Wilson has established Arabica Roasters, which imports beans from brokers in Melbourne and the United States and roasts and grinds fresh gourmet coffee to order.

For the past month, the intoxicating smell of Arabica's small operation has wafted from a rented 140 square meter space in an old boiler house at a Chinese dairy factory in Beijing's north-west. At the other end of the market are international giants Nascife and Maxwell House who have established massive operations in China backed by advertising budgets.

Mr. Wilson is himself a China addict and a coffee convert. He learned the language from a Chinese physicist during a long Antarctic winter while working at the Australian base.

"It helped pass the time," he said.

Mr. Wilson and his American mates initially wanted to set up a coffee shop in Beijing's cafe-less streets but when the fight to secure a retail space failed they forgot the shop and stuck with the coffee.

Arabica shipped in a \$US20,000 (\$27,544) roaster and a few tones of premium coffee beans, which attract 40 per cent duty compared to the 60 per cent levied on processed, packaged coffee.

Arabica investigated the possibility of using Chinese coffee beans grown on southern Yunnan province but the quality was too low because of poor processing and grading.

The Yunnan coffee processing plant opened in 1991 with the help of the United Nations Development Program and processes up to 1000 tonnes of coffee a year but the market remains unstable due to fluctuating world prices and unreliable supply.

"The Chinese export most of their coffee to large commercial roasters who use it as filler because it's cheap and not very good quality," Mr. Wilson said.

"The Chinese have good plant stock and growing conditions but their processing is poor," he said.

He believes it will not be long before affluent Chinese get hooked on coffee and upgrade to a premium product.

www.arabicaroasters.com

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