

The best of East meets West in the middle of the Waikato

by Sue Burgin

An award-winning tea from New Zealand's first and only tea estate in central Waikato is the result of ancient techniques working alongside new innovations, and something you really must see and taste while in the region.

Sen Kong, General Manager of Zealong Tea says they are now the largest internationally certified tea estate in the world.

"We know exactly what's in our teas. There are no additives, no residues, and no heavy metals."

Neighbour's camellia sparks an idea

The Zealong tea story began 25 years ago when founder Vincent Chen spotted a flowering camellia in his neighbour's backyard and thought if camellia can do well in New Zealand, then maybe tea could too. Tea is a type of camellia.

This got Vincent thinking.

After all Waikato's extremely hot days, cold nights and often wet, misty conditions were not unlike the hotter, higher areas in Asia where tea is traditionally grown.

So, in 1996, he brought 1,500 cuttings to New Zealand, of which 130 survived quarantine.

Learning as you go

Sen Kong says there was a lot of learning on the job in the early days.

"It was trial and error, a completely new venture for New Zealand, and Vincent wanted it to be certified organic and completely natural.

In 2010 the estate officially opened to the public.

"By mixing ancient techniques with new innovations, we are now producing 20 tonnes of tea a day. We also have a Tea Room now, famous for its high teas and tea tastings, and a world-class Camellia Restaurant run by a three Michelin star French chef, Jean-Baptiste Pilou."

Oolong + New Zealand = Zealong

Zealong's Oolong teas are all hand-picked. Only the top three leaves on the bush are harvested, and harvesting takes place three times a year in November, January and March.

"We grow one cultivar of tea, but produce from the same cultivar many types of tea through careful processing and oxidation, including an oxidised green tea, a fully oxidised black tea, and three signature partially oxidised oolong teas."

He says these teas form Zealong's international award-winning "Origins" range.

"Broadening the range, our team uses these green, black, and oolong teas to form the foundations of our blends. We think that we have developed a flavour profile for everyone."

It takes time to enjoy the full Zealong experience

Sen says you can easily spend two or three hours at the estate, taking a guided tour, tasting tea in the Tea Room overlooking the plantation, or maybe having lunch at the Camellia Restaurant. Booking is necessary, it's very popular.

He also advises a visit to the retail Tea Boutique, where you can learn about tea, taste it, learn how to prepare it and buy it to take home for friends and family.

Details about the guided tours can be found on www.zealong.com



So how do you brew a good cup of tea?

Well, it's all about your preference according to Sen. Everyone has their preference so it's complicated. However, there are some non-negotiables:

- You must use high-quality water
- Boil it, then take it off the boil to cool slightly
- Preferably use loose-leaf tea
- Brew one to two minutes to taste
- Extract the tea leaves.
- With Zealong tea, one teaspoon of leaves can be reinfused up to eight times a day

So put the kettle on, reach for your favourite cup and enjoy.

Photos previous page: Zealong Tea is the largest internationally certified organic tea estate in the world.

This page from top: Signature High Tea, with a selection of classic morning and afternoon tea delights, includes tea of your choice. Photo credits: www.zealong.com.

