

# *T* New Tea Developments in *Tuscany*

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*Over the last few years, the camellia-growing region of northern Italy has become a tea producing area. Georgina Gordon-Ham reports on how the new venture is going.*

Tuscany is often associated with art, good wine, olive oil, and converted picturesque old farmhouses, which blend into the harmonious and timeless landscape of the region. Its fertile land is famous for flower cultivation, cereals and tobacco, marble in the area of Carrara and Massa, leather, clothing, and textiles near Florence, copper near Siena, and several other items, making it an extremely rich and creative area of Italy.

Readers perhaps remember the article that was published a few years ago in the *Tea International* section of *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal* on tea in Tuscany.

For those who do not, here is a brief refresher on the history of tea production in Tuscany.

Attempts to grow tea in Italy go back almost two centuries to 1810, when some English residents tried to grow the herb in Sicily. There were further attempts in 1871 and 1873, but it is only recently, since the mid 1990s, that tea plants have actually managed to grow and survive in Italian soil. This is due to the efforts of pioneer Guido Cattolica whose ancestor, Angelo Borrini, was a physician at the court of the Lucchese Duchy in the middle of the 18th century and had a collection of camellias,





some of which still grow in the grounds of the family home Villa Borrini of Sant'Andrea di Compito near Lucca.

Cattolica, a botanist, took a keen interest in reviving the family tradition of camellia growing. This later led him to the idea of experimenting with tea — *Camelia Sinensis*. Although initially he produced green tea, he now successfully manufactures three types of tea on his Tuscan plantation — green tea, black tea and semi-fermented tea or Oolong. The small tea garden, with its 3,000 plants, is still run on an experimental basis, and the work is mostly car-

ried out manually — with the exception of the final firing stage which takes place in a recently introduced machine driven dryer. Green tea is processed according to the Japanese tradition of steaming the leaves.

The quality of the tea now being produced in Italy is far better than ever before, in spite of the fact that the crop in 2000 was scarce, owing to extended drought. One of the novelties is the production of a black tea named *Te delle Tre Tigri* (translated Tea of the Three Tigers), which has been patented under the brand name Three Tigers. So, Cattolica's dream of producing Compito tea has come true. It is the first black tea to be produced in Tuscany — and, in fact, in Italy. This tea has a delicate and slightly aromatic flavor, judged by connoisseurs as really excellent. Its flavor is somewhere between Indian Darjeeling and Chinese Keemun. The initial positive reaction has led Cattolica to consider expanding his experimental tea plantation and perhaps even replacing one of his areas reserved for camellias with tea plants. However, this does not mean that camellias are going to be forgotten. On the contrary, although this year the annual festival week for the camellias was not held, the flowering bushes remain a great aesthetic attraction, and the organizers for the camellia festival are preparing for a new launch of events to be held next year.

A further reason for an expansion of tea production at Sant'Andrea di Compito is that the terraced ground is so suitable for tea bushes because it provides better drainage and faces east, and the plan involves the lying down of well-spaced rows of tea plants to facilitate plucking. This project will result in the production of larger quantities of marketable tea. Visitors will also be able to visit the plantation and taste tea prepared with local spring water. Indeed, visitors and experts from many countries, including India, Japan, and recently Formosa, have already been to examine the plantation in Tuscany. Tea tasters agree on the improvement and superior quality both of the green tea initially produced and of the new black variety. Cattolica says that "the improvement is due to better timing in the spring for plucking the crop, and the pre-fermenting and drying of the leaf." He insists on "the importance of quality rather than quantity" and is arranging to start by packaging small quantities of his tea for marketing. Although expansion has taken time, the plantation is developing, and as the Italians say "*Chi va piano, va sano e lontano*" (he who goes slowly, goes safely and surely).

Tea is becoming more and more popular in Italy. Italians tend to prefer light tea drunk with or without lemon, either hot or cold in the summer. All year round, supermarkets now sell ready-to-drink tea in bottles and cartons as well as traditional packets of loose tea or tea bags. No doubt Compito tea will soon be available on the shelves of the local stores. ☞