

TEA IN TUSCANY



Tuscany's village of Sant'Andrea di Compito is famous for its camellias and has been a focal point of the area's annual exhibition 'Ancient Camellias of Lucchesia'. Since the early 1980s, Camellia sinensis has been grown alongside the many different varieties, and journalist, Georgina Gordon-Ham describes the production of this new Italian tea.

Attempts to grow tea in Italy go right back to 1810 when experiments were carried out in Sicily by some English residents in their private garden at Caltanissetta.

Guido Cattolica, a botanist collaborating with the Lucca (Tuscany) Botanical Garden and a reviver of a family tradition in Camellia growing, which later led

him to the idea of experimenting with tea (*Camellia sinensis*), recalled the episode, saying that nothing further was known about it except that those "small bushy trees which grew up to 6 feet had to be pruned every year".

In 1871, the Italian Ministry for Agriculture, Industry and Trade obtained tea seeds from Japan, but

the results were unsatisfactory. "Probably", said Guido Cattolica, "due to the long journey from the Far East".

In 1873, further attempts were made by the Ministry with the advice of Major G H Strutt, who considered that "our climate and soil were very suitable". But, once again, nothing went ahead at that time,



View of the village of Sant'Andrea di Compito near Lucca, Tuscany.



Guido Cattolica.

due to financial problems. However, the idea did not die out completely. In 1879, Professor Agostino Todaro, director of the Botanical Garden of Palermo, Sicily, prophetically wrote, "The various species and varieties of tea cannot easily take root in Sicily,

due to the excessive heat. Tea requires very special conditions in order to flourish and it would be easier for it to take root in central Italy between Florence and Naples." He concluded by saying, "Cultivation attempts carried out

until now in Italy, France and Spain have been in vain."

Although they never gave up, even at the beginning of this century and despite the usual unsatisfactory results, it was not until the 1980s that a new attempt was made by planting seeds in the Lucca Botanical Garden. The experiment was carried out at the foot of the hills of Monti Pisani, at Sant'Andrea di Compito (Lucca), on the north eastern side of a valley – a shady area with a stream and high humidity. Following various experiments, Guido Cattolica feels that results this time have been quite satisfactory. He said, "The tea bush is a sturdy plant and has acclimatised quite well." Now it is a matter of processing and flavour. Experiments are under way and one can already taste a pleasant cup of tea. Italians tend to like a light cup of tea, with or without lemon, either hot or cold in the summer. Experiments are being carried out



The camellia nursery.



Enzo and Gigliola Cattolica, Guido's parents, working in the camellia nursery.

with various kinds of tea. Maybe, in the future, we shall see tea plantations in Italy in the same way that we have vineyards in Britain. As Guido Cattolica concluded, "Who knows? Perhaps, one day, you will hear of 'Compito tea'."

The current activities are thanks to Angelo Borrini, a physician at the court of the Lucchese Duchy in the middle of the 18th century. He had

a superb collection of camellias which can still be seen in the grounds of his home, Villa Borrini of Sant'Andrea di Compito, and the family have revived and continued the tradition under the keen interest and guidance of Guido Cattolica, one of his great great great grandsons, in collaboration with the Lucca Botanical Garden.

