

Dirt-poor peasants profit as 'Zulu Tea' creates a stir in UK

By BRETT HORNER

NTINGWE tea is creating something of a stir in the UK.

Located in the rugged mountains of Nkandia in KwaZulu Natal's Tugela Valley, Ntingwe tea estate is producing some of the world's finest tea leaves and British connoisseurs are paying top dollar for it.

Established in 1987 by Ithala development Finance Corporation, the ambitious R67 million Ntingwe tea project has breathed new life into a desolate region where unemployment and illiteracy rates are as high as 60%. Nkandia was identified in studies the apartheid government undertook in the 1960s as being ideal for tea production.

Lanhia Buleni, Ntingwe's field section manager, says no other crops worked well in the area even community vegetable gardens failed. But now the 300ha tea estate employs 600 people and brings about R2million in wages to the region.

Ryle Perera, Ntingwe's Sri Lankan general manager, says that by 2015, the number of workers on the estate should be closer to 1500 as the project expands to bring a further 285ha of land under cultivation.

"We've achieved a lot," says Perera, who has seen the estate grow into a self-sustaining venture complete with a processing plant that will eventually double in size.

"From day one we took a decision to go for the top end of the market and we know the market can easily absorb all our tea."

This translates into revenue of R6-million a year for Ntingwe, 80% of it

derived from exports, mainly to the UK. The product is marketed in the UK by tea and coffee merchant Taylors of Harrogate and is sold loosely under the estate's banner in tea bags that say Zulu Tea.

Yorkshire Gold a blend of Ntingwe tea and other varieties is a second retail brand.

But the project's main aim is to assist hundreds of "out growers" living on the boundaries of the farm to grow and harvest their own crops to supplement the estate's production.

Nellie Nxumalo, 67, the programme's most successful out-grower, has nurtured her tea plants since last year and is now waiting for next year's harvest. This will yield her first true income.

Perera estimates that, should Nxumalo double the size of her plot, she can expect to earn an annual income of between R60 000 and R80 000.

Johannesburg tea and coffee agent WM Cahn says South Africa's tea export market is worth about R84-million a year and that demand for Ntingwe tea is exceeding supply.

A company spokesman says the product is proving so popular with the British that 98% of WM Cahn's Ntingwe stock has already been sold "and the season is not yet over".

The spokesman says that WM Cahn has established ties with a number of buyers internationally and is looking to expand in the US, Europe and Pakistan.