

A Cup of Sunshine from Dimbula



Slopes cloaked in tea immersed in the mist of Talawakelle

Amidst a silhouette of mountains, tea fields wrap around the hills, colouring the slopes in pacifying hues of green. Picturesque scenes that are home to tea that brew a delicate cup.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Anuradha Perera

To the sprawling peaks of what is now the Dimbula region, the British first came with seedlings of coffee in hand, and then the blight struck. Buoyant Dimbula was one of the early regions to convert these fields to tea plantations. As Ceylon Tea took off with only success in sight, more and more planters traversed across waters to these wild hills, that brew cups of golden orange. With this sensation, came the railways, Great Western, Radalla Talawakelle and Nanu Oya; a station each for an estate to transport goods to the port of Colombo.



The Dimbula tea region spans from Nanu Oya to the Golden Valley of Bogawantalawa. As a whole, refreshingly mellow tea is made here, which unlike tea from the Uva region has jasmine and cypress nuances. The hallmark of Dimbula is the microclimatic conditions created by the region's complex geography. Hence, each estate boasts of a unique character of its own.

Bearwell estate, split by the gushing Agra Oya, spans across the slopes of Thalawakelle wrapped in floral fragrances rising with the mist. Like colourful perched birds, tea pluckers stand out from the leafy green. The estate's origins date back to the 1890s, where the plantation's divisions Wallaha, Belgravia and Fairfield were estates of their own. Later the four were combined to create Bearwell. The factory produces an all round brew with a touch of more colour, body and floral hints.



Great Western Railway Station at the foot of the Great Western mountain range

At the foot of the Great Western mountain range, where the fields of the Great Western tea estate span out, the brew is lighter, yet more flavoursome. Once a reputed coffee plantation, the estate hosts up to 27 cultivars of tea today. This includes 130-year-old tea bushes that grew from the original seedlings of China. Bogawantalawa's 'Golden Valley' teas are a lighter glowing cup.

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As the doors of the Bearwell estate's factory open, the earthen warm aroma of tea punches the senses. The machinery churn with efficiency, withering, rolling, sifting and sorting the oxidising leaves. During the Western Quality Season from January to end March, where dry winds sweep through the tea fields and rains take a break, these efficient beasts produce tea that fetch some of the highest prices. "There is no rain during these three months. Therefore, bushes are under tremendous stress. With less moisture in the plant, less volatile compounds and flavoids are concentrated in the leaves. This brings out the essence of tea", says Senaka Alawattegama, Senior Regional Manager, Talawakella Tea Estates.

In a glass of hot water, the Bearwell Blossom bloomed; a signature silver tip-based handmade tea, invented by the Bearwell Factory. At Great Western estate, tea is pressed into a hard coin that can be infused in water. An innovation by the

factory, it is an infusion of the estate's finest BOPF and Dust 1 Grades. True to the resilient soul of Dimbula's founding planters, the estates in Thalawakelle have embraced innovation in the face of competition. Technology comes to their aid in the form of plucking machines and sheers during workforce shortages. Although precise hand plucking is still cherished, Bearwell estate is one of many that have identified special divisions for mechanised tea plucking.

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Thus, as the centuries add on, the Dimbula region promises to blossom into the future with new ideas and its signature bright cuppa of sunshine.

