



Tea pluckers work with precision

Sheathed in the perfume of roses and shrouded in Ramayan mythology, the cold climes of Uda Pussellawa produce a tangy brew. A cuppa that is only little darker and stronger than neighbouring Nuwara Eliya teas.

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



Tharindu

Wickramasinghe, Senior
Group Manager, Ragalla
Estate

Uda Pussellawa is an endless canvass of emerald tea fields that span across the wild slopes. There is little else here other than *Camellia sinensis*, the towns are small and houses inconspicuously stick out from the estates. With the Hakgala Strict Natural Reserve in the background, it is just eastward of Nuwara Eliya yet mimics the climate of the Uva district.

Although one of the younger tea districts of the higher elevation, it was this unique climate that drew the colonial era British coffee planters to the Uda Pussellawa peaks. And as the annals of history details, the Mathurata division here produced the best coffee in the Island, centuries ago, before the Blight struck and the fields were converted to tea.

Benefiting from the Halgran Oya agro climatic condition, Ragalla Estate is one of the older and larger tea estates in the region. As we cruised amidst the green, lorries were

transporting the morning leaf collection to the factory. Pluckers worked ferociously on the fields, stopping only to offer us a welcoming smile.

With only one monsoon, Uda Pussellawa is one of the more challenging areas for growing tea. However, this dry climate, which stresses the leaf to yield its best flavours is what creates the defining characteristics for which Uda Pussellawa tea is sought after. The region has two quality seasons, one from January to March and the other from July to September, the latter coinciding with the Uva quality season. “The best conditions for leaf growth is however from March to April, where sunny mornings are followed by afternoon/evening showers”, says Tharindu Wickramasinghe, Senior Group Manager, Ragalla Estate.



The Ragalla Factory, nestled within the verdant green slopes of Uda Pussellawa

Within the factory built in 1949 the withering tufts whirred and the machines churned; the Semi Orthodox-Rotorvane tea manufacturing process was in full swing. From here a light bright cup is produced, slightly darker than the teas of the higher elevations. It has a strong body and a tangy nuance. At the nearby Liddlesdale Estate and Factory, hand made teas supplement products of high value. These delicate teas are rolled or curled with tea tips, buds or flowers. Once brewed the glass glows with a bright gold liquid, the spring water and the cold climate breathing life to the dainty buds and tips.

The Ragalla Estate Manager’s bungalow is like a cottage out of an old English country story. In the 1900s it was known for its beautiful rose garden. And a bouquet of roses from this

garden were presented to Queen Elizabeth II by the British planters when she visited the Island during her Commonwealth tour in 1954. Back in the day, the Mathurata Planters were also known for their amusing and sophisticated dances. The walls of the now dilapidated Mathurata Planters Club at the Gonapitiya Estate illustrate the passed jubilant times, an era where planters found leisure in fraternising and sport. Still, what provokes fascination is the timber bowling alley, with its wooden bowling pins and balls. It is thought to be Sri Lanka's first bowling alley, a remnant of bygone colonial life.

Uda Pussellawa is also famously entwined in The Ramayana myth. The Liddlesdale Estate faces a backdrop of the Harasbatha mountain range, where locals believe a faint cross shape on the mountain marks the spot where Ravana would land his vehicle, the Dandumonara. They also retell myths that the mount holds a reserve of the liquid that fueled the vehicle and even that the body of Ravana is buried somewhere on the mountain range.

Amidst a scenery of stout evergreen pines in a distance, the planting fraternity of Uda Pussellawa carry on their profession with energy. They harness the best of the old and adapt to the modern, enhancing an exquisite brew that, centuries on, continues to sustain much of the country's economy.

