Mid-Grown Tea: The Centre of Attention

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Bird’s eye view of the Kenilworth Tea Estate
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A bright and full-bodied cup of tea is produced in the Medium Grown elevation of the Island. Perched between the Low-Grown and High Grown, teas produced in this region have a distinctive identity and long history. One that helped put Sri Lanka on the map.

Words Nawya Ponnamperuma | **Photography** Geeth Viduranga and Anuradha Perera

The heat of the low-country disappears slowly and all at once as you spiral upwards to the lush greenery of Ginigathhena. You are bound to roll the windows down and breath in the salubrious air of the region when ascending to the mid country. Here a steaming cuppa binds tradition with taste. The sound of the rolling river water clashing against massive rocks is the perfect soundtrack for a livelihood of a thousand lives.

It was the British that recognised the potential of Sri Lanka's unique climate and ventured into planting tea. Thus, the Father of Ceylon Tea, James Taylor, started successfully testing the steady growth of tea in the Mid-Elevation at Loolecondera estate in Hewaheta in the Kandy district. It was a timely decision as when the Blight or 'Coffee Rust' struck the coffee plantations, tea was ready to take its place and become the lifeblood of the nation.

Nourished by the South West Monsoon that usually showers the area between April and May and the North East Monsoon of October, the tea bushes of the mid-grown area prosper all year round. Generally, this area experiences a pattern of 3 months of rain followed by 3 dry months. In contrast to the other tea producing districts in Sri Lanka, there is no apparent quality season in the Mid-Elevation. However, during the very 1st dry season from January to March these tea bushes under go immense stress and flavonoids are released, and there is a slight elevation in quality.

Manoj Ramdas,
Manager, Kenilworth
Estate

Named after a British Castle, Kenilworth Tea Estate is located right on the border of the mid-grown region. Nestled between the Rivers Kelani and Mahaweli, the fields of Kenilworth spreads across 295 hectares. The Kotmale Mahaweli Maha Seya that emerges through the slopes adds a sense of tranquility to the serene view. Within this serendipitous atmosphere, diligent tea pluckers work from 8am to 4pm, taking a break to drop off their daily leafy bounty in the afternoon and evening.

Like its contemporaries in the region, Kennilworth undertakes a Leafy Orthodox Manufacture, quite different to that of the Higher Elevation tea producers. Although technology is embraced, traditional techniques are treasured as a sign of quality and authenticity in tea production. Workers carefully sort the leaves with an experienced eye. The climate and production result in a distinctive bright and intensely full-bodied tea. Here, at Kenilworth however, the rolling process in the Orthodox method takes place for 2 hours and 30 minutes, a tad longer than other regions. This combined with the estate’s unique positioning creates a coppery bright tea liquor, stronger than other producers in the Mid-Elevation, says Manoj Ramdas, Manager, Kenilworth Estate. Further, optimising on the many features unique to the leaf, almost 14 grades are produced.

These tea cloaked slopes of Ginigathhena are lost in the swirl of mist, while the Kotmale Stupa is a glowing pinnacle in its midst. Ceylon Tea, the livelihood of this region, is closely knit with the culture of this land.