

Rich Red Ruhuna

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Low grown green: a smallholder's estate by the road

Ruhuna, a relative latecomer to the tea industry, has come of age. Its coppery aroma has attracted the attention of international markets that have a penchant for a strong brew.

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Many have witnessed the golden beaches and crystalised waters of the South. Yet, only a fair few have been privy to its rustic wetland terrain, where rural traditions of the archetypal Southern village survive. These parts that border the Sinharaja Rainforest, are really a part of up-country at heart with lush green fields and a whiff of white mist at the cool mornings. This different climate became the South's fortune, converting its Westward wetland flanks to tea that give the province prime economical importance.

Ruhuna's star as a tea region began rising almost four decades after the first up-country plantations. The first low elevation estates opened up at the foothills of the central mountains. Then, this green patch of land not higher than 2,000 feet began spreading, till it was finally touching the dark wet rainforests of Sinharaja at one end and the dry coastal belt at the other.

Nourished by the Southwest monsoon, the humid atmosphere, and the peculiar fertile soil, the tea leaf grows dark, glossy and fast. Brewed, it materialises as a rich red liquid, full-flavoured, strong and robust, a liquor distinctively unique from the other six tea regions.

As a rule, Ruhuna values the appearance of its dark tea leaf and the deep red that beautifully fills the tulip shaped Ottoman tea glass. Its tea story, like Cinderella finally putting on the ball gown, unfolded with the wealth of the Middle East that craved for this strong tea and Russia that fell in love with its robust flavour. Fortunately for Sri Lanka, this affair continues strong, and Ruhuna with low-grown Sabaragamuwa contributes more than half of the export tea.

We headed to the Pothotuwa tea factory in Morawaka, where Managing Director Anil Alwis guided us through the birth of the brew. In Ruhuna, it must be remembered that the planting fraternity have nearly always been home-grown, even (contrary to what you would believe) at its beginnings in the early 20th century. As such, even today, the soul of the industry in these parts are the smallholders; those who nurture the tea bush in their private lands or home gardens. Quite different to the large factory-owned plantations in the cold hills. Once harvested, the leaf is collected by factories like Pothotuwa, which rely entirely on smallholders for leaf. The relationship between smallholder and factory is almost touching, as in turn the factories sustain them by providing fertilizer, cash advances and new agricultural knowledge.

The Pothotuwa tea factory is immaculate and orderly, the epitome of tea production in the modern era. We had already experienced the primary focus on hygiene when we were handed white lab coats, headwear, and sandals upon entering. As tea is consumed, tea producers will avert every risk of contamination. Even the water here is tested rigorously for salmonella and microbiological contamination. The classic orthodox production process remains true to its colonial ideology. It's as labour intensive as always, however workers handle the process while paying homage to cleanliness. The efficient Cut, Tear and Curl (CTC) process whirls on, machines outputting a finer version of the grades. Eventually, the tea lands on a high table for oxidation, where temperature and humidity are innovatively controlled. It is on this table that Ruhuna's dark and deep colours are nurtured.

The future of Ruhuna is viewed with mixed feelings, with opportunities to capitalise on and climatic challenges at bay. Yet, *Camellia sinensis*, the little plant that helped make this ancient land of Ruhuna one of Sri Lanka's most important economic districts once again has more to offer. There is something sturdy about the plant we saw carpeting the smallholder estates. And amidst the mature plants emerged new plots where seedlings were still taking root.

