

Grower hopes to raise premium tea in North Idaho

Scott Maben/SR

The Northwest is celebrated for its wines and microbrews and coffee culture, with craft distilleries and custom cannabis on the rise.

Is it tea time yet?

Josephie Dean Jackson hopes so. The Australian-born Texas transplant is putting in camellia plants at her new home in east Coeur d'Alene with the goal of producing premium teas for an exclusive clientele under the name Coeur d'Tea or Coeur d'Thé.

“It’s just a journey. Tea is always considered to be a journey; even the act of drinking it is a journey,” Jackson said. “We’re just wanting to start this adventure and see where it leads. It’s a matter of curiosity – scientific as well as cultural – to see what happens.”

A certified tea specialist, Jackson has grown the *Camellia sinensis* evergreen shrubs since 2009 in east Texas, plucking the leaves for white, green, black, oolong and pressed teas that sell for up to \$600 a pound retail. With multiple infusions from premium loose leaf teas, that works out to about \$1 a cup, she said.

“A lot of it comes from the craftsmanship of the maker, because each time you make the tea it’s totally different,” Jackson said of the process.

She also teaches others how to make tea and even leads classes in pairing tea with wine, artisan beer and single-malt Scotch, and making cocktails from tea.

Passing through the Inland Northwest last year, Jackson was struck by how much the region resembles the Australian sheep country of her youth. “This reminds me so much of home. ... As we came in, it was just very poignant,” Jackson said.

Inspired by the landscape, she and her husband bought a house on 9 acres in the Fernan Hill area. Jackson expects she’ll spend most of her time here ramping up her new tea-growing operation.

She already has some seedlings in the ground, with an order for 10,000 seeds from Nepal due to arrive by the end of this year, plus more from the Republic of Georgia.

It will take four to seven years for those plants to reach full maturity, but Jackson also plans to add 4-year-old bushes from Oregon. With the temperate North Idaho summers, she is aiming for up to six growth spurts, or flushes, per growing season from as many as 10 varieties.

The plants do well from sea level up to 9,000 feet, and from the tropics to such locales as Korea, Japan, Argentina, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Vancouver Island, B.C. Tea growers are getting a foothold in the U.S. as well, including in Hawaii and west of the Cascades in Washington and Oregon.

“Wherever blueberries grow, it’s a very strong indicator that tea can grow,” Jackson said.

She believes fine teas are poised to surge in popularity in the U.S., driven by the tastes of health-conscious millennials and baby boomers. Her optimism is shared by Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, who estimated the tea market’s worth at \$90 billion when the Seattle-based company acquired Teavana, a specialty tea retailer in Atlanta, for \$620 million in late 2012.

But is the western edge of the Rocky Mountains a promising place to grow tea? Jackson said she’s not worried about the North Idaho winters. She confronted the cold in Texas, too, and kept her plants alive.

“I have photos of our tea with about 3 or 4 inches of snow on it and looking totally happy,” she said.

She employs careful mulching around her camellias to insulate them in winter without smothering the root systems.

“So once they’ve adapted to the cold, they’re really quite hardy. I mean, they’re growing in Nepal in the foothills of the Himalayas, which is really quite brutal,” she said.

Moisture is the bigger issue for the success of her new operation, Jackson said.

“We are on the outer reaches of precipitation, and that’s probably going to be more of a concern. However, we’ve got nice well water here,” she said.

Jackson will consult with the University of Idaho Extension Service, which can help her with soil testing and analysis of the nutrients in the plant leaves. The agency also can help identify any pests or diseases that may pop up, or navigate state regulations that apply to a new specialty crop, said Jennifer Jensen, a Sandpoint extension educator with a focus on horticulture and small farms.

“Since this is a crop I’m not familiar with, it would definitely be a learning curve for myself, and I think for her to grow it in this area, it’s going to be quite a bit of a learning curve, too,” Jensen said.

She plans to visit Jackson’s property to have a closer look. “I do think it’s maybe a little challenging, since no one has been growing it in this area before,” Jensen said. “And I do sort of worry too about the cold-hardiness of the crops.”

Coeur d’Alene is in Zone 7 on the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s plant hardiness map. In that zone, the average low temperature for the year falls between 0 and 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

“But in Coeur d’Alene you can still get some cold temperatures that are well below that,” Jensen said.

Jackson said she’s prepared to take the risk.

“With agriculture you’re always going to have challenges, and if you don’t know that right from the get-go, then you’re going to be dissuaded with anything that you’re going to grow here,” she said.

“Nature’s going to throw whatever at you, so you just have to be resilient and you have to innovate. If you’re creating new opportunities for employment and for other people to start businesses and be independent, that’s all the better.”