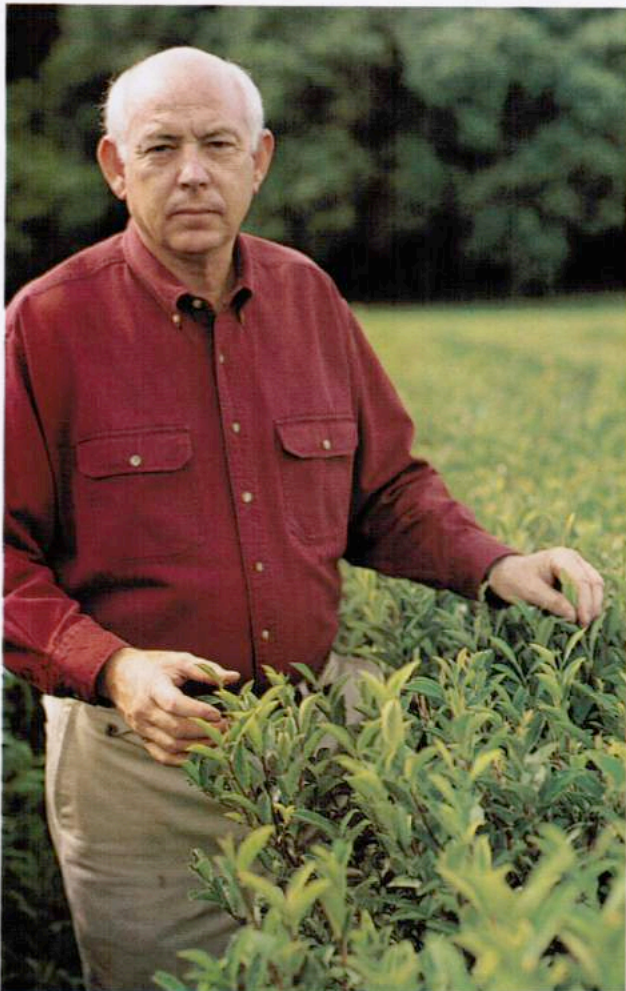


Taking Tea in Carolina

Tea's roots go deep on Wadmalaw Island, home of America's oldest, and only, tea plantation.
By Jonathan Lerner / Photographs by Joe Comick





On the coastal islands and along the tidal rivers of South Carolina's Low Country, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the South's plantation system was born. Vast properties worked by many African hands produced indigo and rice, and later Sea Island cotton, in quantities enough to make their owners fabulously wealthy. Now a different sort of plantation is thriving on one of the subtropical islands near Charleston—the only commercial tea-growing operation in the United States. In its small modern way, The Charleston Tea Plantation on Wadmalaw Island neatly inverts some of the agricultural arrangements that prevailed here long ago. Compared to the region's historic plantations, the place is trifling in size, just 127 acres. And it succeeds only because of a harvesting machine which frees it from dependence on manual labor.

"Picking tea is not a sweatshop, horrendous job," says Mack Fleming, the plantation's co-owner. "But it's not very stimulating. And we couldn't pay minimum wage and compete with imported tea. I've seen tea plantations with 14,000 hand pluckers in Kenya. One person—tea pickers are usually women—can hand-pick one acre. Our machine could harvest 500 acres. So it could replace 500 workers."

This mechanical tea harvester, which resembles a small barge floating above the waist-deep rows of densely green

tea bushes, was designed here, when Charleston Tea Plantation was a research and development station for Lipton Tea. Fleming, who is trained as a horticulturist, was the Lipton operation's director of tea research. When the company decided to discontinue the effort in 1987, he and partner Bill Hall bought the property. "We saw the opportunity to create a niche market," Fleming says. The American Classic Tea they produce now has regional distribution in supermarkets, and is available elsewhere in specialty shops and by mail order. Successful as his enterprise is, Fleming doesn't hesitate to point out that "Lipton spills more tea in a day than we produce in a year."

In the worldwide story of growing tea, the United States deserves a mere footnote. But that footnote leads right to the Carolinas. The earliest recorded successful cultivation of tea in this country was in 1760, in the vegetable garden at the Moravian settlement of Bethabara, North Carolina. The plant seems to have flourished, but evidently the Moravians never figured out how to process the leaves into a satisfying drink. By 1764, they gave up trying, and let the *camellia sinensis* bushes go wild. "The sheep like to nibble of it," it was noted in that year.

On the early coastal plantations,



PAGE 36: DR. CHARLES SHEPERD, FOUNDER OF PINEHURST TEA GARDENS NEAR SUMMERVILLE, CIRCA 1900.

PAGE 37: VIEW FROM THE CHARLESTON TEA PLANTATION.

OPPOSITE PAGE: LIVE OAKS ARCH OVER THE ROAD LEADING TO THE PLANTATION; MACK FLEMING IN THE TEA GROVES.

ABOVE: JUST-PICKED TEA BEFORE OXIDATION. **BELOW:** TEA BUSHES ARE PLANTED IN NEAT ROWS FOR EASE IN HARVESTING.

"nobody listed tea in the inventories of their estates," says local historian Elizabeth Stringfellow, a native of Johns Island, which is separated from Wadmalaw only by a shallow tidal creek. "But it could have been. They tried to grow trees to make silk, and just about everything else." Fifteen miles up the Ashley River, at Middleton Place—once the richest and most baronial of the Low Country plantations, and the site of America's first formal garden—tea plants were introduced, perhaps as early as 1800. But their purpose



One tenth-generation South Carolinian who was asked to sample the tea declared it “genteel, polite and restrained”.

was ornamental, not agricultural. Today Middleton Place's gorgeous grounds, faithfully restored and maintained, are open to the public, and you can still find about a dozen of these thicket-like, antique tea plants there, among thousands of examples of their larger and showier cousin, *camellia japonica*, for which the garden is famous.

In 1880, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, hoping to spur a new industry, established an experimental tea farm about ten miles further inland from Middleton Place, near Summerville. Eight years later, it was purchased and run privately, as Pinehurst Tea Gardens. Pinehurst produced an oolong that won first prize at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1905. “But even in Summerville,” says Mack Fleming, “labor was a major problem.” With the owner's death in 1915, the property was sold and subdivided. Many private gardens around Summerville still have *camellia sinensis* among their plantings, descendants of those once commercially productive tea bushes. When Lipton set up its farm on Wadmalaw in 1963, it was with cuttings from those same plants.

To reach the Charleston Tea Plantation, you head out of delightful old Charleston on the Savannah Highway, through a dreary and seemingly endless commercial sprawl. Relief comes by turning off toward Johns Island. Almost immediately, the road hops the intracoastal waterway, over a pokey drawbridge, waiting for which will slow you right down to island time. Many of the oceanfront islands along this stretch of the coast, like Kiawah and Seabrook, are now private resort and retirement “plantations,” with sanitized landscaping schemes and manned security gates. Even those without beaches, like Johns Island, if they're close to the city, are being suburbanized. But on this route you'll pass funky boatyards, unpainted bungalows and scrubby patches of pine, palmetto and a holly known as *cassina* hereabouts. Huge live oaks stretch their branches above the roadway, trailing silvery plumes of Spanish moss. One such tree—the Angel Oak—stands in a small park on Johns Island. It rises only 65 feet, but its twisting branches spread out to shade an area of 17,000 square feet. Thought to be 1,400 years old, it is worth the short detour to see.

Once you turn toward Wadmalaw, and cross Bohicket Creek onto the island, it feels more rural still. Vegetable fields alternate with shadowy woods. The road seems to run forever across the flat terrain. When you finally drive up the sandy lane into the tea plantation, the hard geometry of its fields is striking. The bright green rows of *camellia sinensis*

stretch away like the precisely trained hedges of some obsessive gardener: 6 feet wide, 12 inches apart, and as flat-topped as the haircut on a Citadel cadet, all to match the specifications of the harvesting machine.

Mack Fleming is proud of his efficient machine. It's not the only mechanical tea harvester in the world. But while the others use a paddle-wheel and belt, this one uses air to blow the leaves into a hopper. “It can harvest faster, and in larger quantities, even in the rain. And it doesn't bruise the leaf.”

That suits his finicky partner, Bill Hall. Hall is the “inside” man, responsible for processing and the taste of the tea itself. He completed a four-year formal apprenticeship in London, sometimes tasting hundreds of teas a day. His father and grandfather were both tea tasters, too. “It's much more complicated than tasting coffee or wine,” he says of the arcana of tea. “We have tea terminology that wouldn't mean anything at all to somebody who isn't a taster.”

Harvest season is essentially the same as growing season, roughly April through October. The harvesting machine passes over the flat tops—or “plucking table”—of the plantation's half million tea plants every fifteen to eighteen days. “With coffee,” notes Hall, “beans are grown once a year, and that's your quality. With tea, there's constant fluctuation through the season, in rainfall and heat. The main influence on quality is whether the leaves are from the beginning, middle or end of the season. At the beginning of the season, the plant is lush. It's had the whole winter to rest. So it's pumping out leaf quicker, more juices are retained, and there's more flavor and taste in that tea. As the year progresses, it weakens.”

Hall reserves some leaf from the season's earliest yield to package as a limited edition tea called “First Flush.” Its aficionados put their names on a waiting list months in advance. First Flush makes a fresher, more citrusy brew, with a little more bite, than the plantation's similar and very pleasant standard tea. There is also a bergamot-infused

“Governor Gray.” All three bear the brand “American Classic Tea.” Through the season, Hall continually tastes the newly harvested leaves, allocating them to one of fifteen storage bins, and then blending from these to maintain consistent taste as the tea is processed and packed.

Dry, the leaves have a reddish cast. Brewed, the tea has a surprisingly pale, amber color—compared to brews of more familiar loose teas, like Twinings'—and an absence of smokey or tarry notes. “Our soil yields a less spicy, smoother, mellower tea

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OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: BUSHES ARE TOP-PRUNED TO ACCOMMODATE THE MECHANICAL TEA HARVESTER; MACK FLEMING IN THE TEA HARVESTER; AMERICAN CLASSIC TEA IN VARIOUS FORMS; AMERICAN CLASSIC TEA, ON ICE; CAMELLIA SINENSIS, UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL.

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than some," explains Hall. "We're shooting for what's called a light, bright tea. The English traditionally go for a thicker, stronger one. The way we process it, with less oxidation, gives a lighter cup." One tenth-generation South Carolinian who was asked to sample the tea concurred, declaring it "genteel," "polite," and "restrained"—and was obviously gratified to be able to say so.

American Classic Tea is packed loose in quarter- and half-pound tins, and can be ordered in larger quantities. Again in comparison to more familiar loose teas, the leaves are less finely chopped. "I like the larger leaf for teapots," remarks Hall. "It's more traditional." A finer cut of the standard tea is also sold loose for use in automatic tea brewers, and packed into tea bags.

"Tea deteriorates with age," he points out. "Many imported teas, given the time involved in shipping, auctioning, and packaging, can be a year or more old when you buy them." But in this case, the growing, processing, and packing are all done on the Wadmalaw plantation. "We can get ours from the field to the store shelf in two or three weeks."

Fleming and Hall acknowledge a debt to Lipton for product and marketing savvy, basic growing techniques, and for the mechanical harvester. Yet the plantation's role in tea R&D did not end

when it changed hands. "We've perfected a low-cost system of tea propagation—high humidity beds—which doesn't need electricity to run an irrigation system," explains Fleming. By this technique, in a sealed system, the cut stem is placed in a moist medium, while 100% humidity is maintained around the leaves; thus, the cutting remains hydrated while it roots.

"We use a trickle irrigation and fertilization system, which applies water and nutrients to the roots of the plants," Fleming goes on. "The thing I'm most proud of is that we have not sprayed an insecticide or fungicide on this tea since April of '78. But are we organically grown? No. We don't use organic nitrogen sources. We wouldn't get the growth we need. And the manure would be six inches deep."

"Tea is such a natural, clear product anyway," enthuses Fleming. "It doesn't touch the ground. Harvesting is not by hand. And we dry it at 248°, which is a huge purifier itself."

Historian Elizabeth Stringfellow has yet to find an early record of *camellia sinensis* being grown on Johns Island, where at 75, after a career away, she once again occupies her childhood home. "I'm sure it would be the same for Wadmalaw," she says. "But now, we had tea—we picked cassina leaves in the early spring, and dried them. It made a fairly decent green tea. Botanists will say this is crazy because it's supposed to make you sick; its Latin name is *ilex vomitoria*. When I was growing up—living so far from Charleston—if you ran out of tea, you just made your own, from this plant that grew wild all over the property."

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Jonathan Lerner is the author of the oral history Voices from Wounded Knee, the novel Caught in a Still Place, and numerous articles on food, travel, historic preservation and decorative arts. He lives in Atlanta.

VISITING AND ORDERING

A free open house is held at the Charleston Tea Plantation on the first Saturday of every month during the harvest, from May-October. Hall and Fleming speak on tasting and growing tea, and there's a chance to view the harvester and fields. Tea is served—iced, of course; this is the South. Phone ahead for information. If you can't find Charleston Tea Plantation's products locally—which include tea jellies and tea honey, and an addictive traditional Low Country sesame cookie called a benne wafer—call to request a free catalog. Charleston Tea Plantation, 6617 Maybank Highway, Wadmalaw Island, SC 29487. (800) 443-5987.

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