



TEA FARM

GO CAMELLIA SINENSIS GO!

By David Morrison

On Valentine's Day Susan and I attended the Victoria Tea Festival. As a coffee-head, my interest in tea had only ever extended to a cup on the rare occasions when not in the mood for Wakey-Wakey Juice. And, although obviously aware of it, I'd never really investigated the culture of tea or its importance to certain societies. I did not, therefore, expect too much from the day. Susan, on the other hand, absolutely *loves* the stuff in all its forms, so I was happy to tag along to indulge my darling's passion on the official day of romance.

After four hours at the festival, however, my attitude towards tea had shifted from inattentive ignorance to eager curiosity. I'd sampled I don't know how many different teas, probably amounting to several pints. Some of them were *amazing*. I'm not a fan of grapefruit, so if beforehand you'd told me I would verge on tears of joy over the deliciousness of a pink grapefruit tea, I'd have deemed you unhinged. Yet this is what happened.

Aside from the flavour-fest we also learned a great deal. One festival highlight was Silk Road's Daniela Cubelic performing the Chinese tea ceremony with a running narrative concerning the intricacies of preparation and the symbolism therein. Another was witnessing the passionate Jared Nyberg of JagaSilk expertly preparing maccha green tea, a powdered variant I'd not even heard of until this day. But, although we didn't know it at the time, our most significant

encounter was with North Cowichan couple, Victor Vesely and Margit Nellesmann.

We bought several teas at the festival including a lovely peppermint, lemongrass, liquorice root and Calendula blend named Mysteaque, one of 60 teas available from Vesely and Nellesmann's Teafarm. Initially, though, we were attracted to their stand by the latter's stunning ceramic works, particularly her range of (both functional and decorative) teapots. This side of their business is known as Artfarm and was responsible for the production of the festival's 800 individually numbered, Chinese-style, souvenir tasting cups.

On the way home I reflected on the impassioned way the enigmatic Vesely spoke to us of his teas. And I thought how cool it was that while he and the elegant Nellesmann vend teas, she produces imaginative wares from which to serve and sup them. Intrigued by this satisfying, compact business model, I decided to get in touch to find out more.

Arrival at their Teafarm/Artfarm base on the Richards Trail in Westholme is as powerful an introduction to Vesely and Nellesmann's world as could be imagined.

“Sandwiched between the protective peaks of Mt. Sicker and Mt. Richards, their 11-acre property is a spread of bucolic gorgeousness instantly promoting serenity in the visitor.”





The centre of operations is a long building below their house, where a small tea bar has been created for visitors to sample and buy Teafarm's full range of imported, organic fair trade teas. Nellemann's studio occupies the other half of the building and her lovely hand-built pieces are displayed all around the tea bar.

As the self-taught Danish ceramicist explains, the couple moved to this property from Vancouver in 2003 in order to get back to the land. "We were looking for a more rural lifestyle and sustainability, being more self-sufficient. We initially had a dream of having a lavender farm, but when we found this place it felt like somewhere we would want to share."

Consequently, Vesely and Nellemann—who grew up on a farm on the Danish island of Funen—have moved into organic farming, also growing flowers and herbs both for their own use and to sell at farmers' markets. "We grow a lot of the herbs we use in our teas, as well as lavender, different mints, Calendula and roses," Nellemann continues. "As for vegetables, it's artichokes and banana-fingerling potatoes; the soil here is perfect for potatoes."

Although he had no prior farming experience before moving to the Cowichan Valley, it is Vesely that does the majority of the planting and harvesting. "With her clay Margit works with the earth in one way, and I work with it in another," he says.

A fascinating man capable of mesmerizing with his ardent and frequently profound discourses on any given topic, Vesely has lived a life full of adventure. Hailing from Montreal, his professional background includes such diverse employment as within the David Suzuki Foundation and as a suit model for Japanese television commercials. While "consistently avoiding a structured career and having a lot of fun doing it", Vesely has travelled extensively, especially in Japan and China, where he was introduced to, and became immersed in, the world of tea.

But it is on his own acreage where Vesely and Nellemann's most exciting adventure has just begun. This

seemingly workaholic couple are attempting to become the first—certainly in the Cowichan Valley and, unless anyone knows better, perhaps all of Canada—to successfully cultivate *Camellia sinensis*, known to you and I as the tea plant.

"It's not so much rolling the dice, as we feel strongly and intuitively that it can work," states Vesely with sanguinity. "We have conditions that are fortunate: we get good heat, there's a high moisture level here, the fog rolls in. It's why our artichokes are quite successful, as conditions replicate such as Castroville in California (*The Artichoke Center of the World*). We're obviously not replicating Assam where it's hot and jungle-like, but more like Northern Japan or Southern Russia. And the plants *do* like rain, so all the elements are there."

"Yes, we know we're being a little ambitious in pushing the growing limits," continues Nellemann, "but the way you do this, as I know we're going to lose plants, is to focus on the ones that survive and take cuttings from them. Over time we hope to have a hardier variety that has acclimatized, and then you have a new hybrid. It will be a challenge, and we love a good challenge, so we're wondering if we can pull this off!"

When I visited Teafarm/Artfarm the terracing for this thrilling experiment was nearing completion.

"The plants went in on May 25, a potentially momentous day in Canadian agricultural history."

We will have to wait and see what happens next, so watch this space, but unsurprisingly the enterprising Vesely and Nellemann are already looking to the future.

"We think this has amazing potential," says Nellemann. "The new 'thing' now is cooking with tea, and so we're partnering with chocolatiers, restaurateurs and chefs that come up with recipes to cook with our teas.

For example, one chocolatier came up with tea-infused truffles. So within the tea world, there's *huge* potential. When our tea takes off, what will it be? Assam and Darjeeling have their own flavours, so that's what we'd want to play with—what's the flavour of Cowichan?"

I have everything crossed for these guys to succeed in their bold ambitions to bring tea to Vancouver Island. What an extraordinary breakthrough it would be if they did indeed make it happen! And when they do find the 'Flavour of Cowichan' I will be honoured to clink tasting cups with its creators in celebration because, oddly enough, I've grown rather fond of tea lately. ●

For further information contact Victor Vesely and Margit Nellmann by telephone (250) 748 3811, or by email at info@teafarm.ca, or visit www.teafarm.ca, www.artfarm.ca and www.margitnellemann.com.



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