



Photo: David Morrison & Linda Tenney

## Teafarm: The Great Cowichan Valley Tea Experiment

By David Morrison

Whether it was a happy accident or an effect of journalistic instinct, just over five years ago I found myself witnessing the beginning of what is gradually turning into a remarkable story. I say 'gradually' because by its very nature the story can only develop as slowly as its principal character. The character in question is a plant – more accurately, an evergreen shrub called *camellia sinensis* – commonly known to the world as the tea plant.

It was Valentine's Day 2010 when my wife Susan and I visited the Victoria Tea Festival. It was interesting, colourful, and a pleasant way to

spend the Day of Romance with my girl. We met, chatted with, and learned about tea from a few vendors, buying some of their wares as we did so. Among them were Victor Vesely and Margit Nellesmann, a couple from the Cowichan Valley running a business selling their own blended teas – sourced on a fair trade basis from organic tea farms around the world - and ceramic artist Margit's amazing teapots. On the way home I thought about the charismatic Vesely, the svelte Nellesmann, and what I considered to be their neat, compact business model. Mulling story ideas for another publication,

I decided to contact them to find out more, unwittingly stumbling into a far bigger story than I had bargained for!

In the Canadian Tea Industry section of the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada pages of the Government of Canada website, the introduction categorically states that "Canada does not have the appropriate climate for growing tea." That's as maybe, and generally correct, but – at least on a small scale - Vesely and Nellesmann have proven the naysayers wrong. What started as an experiment when I met this adventurous couple five years

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will later this year result in a limited edition batch of Cowichan Valley-grown tea for sale to the general public.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry!” says the charming Vesely, a man clearly passionate for his subject. “It’s very emotional, and has been an amazing journey. It couldn’t have happened without people like yourself sharing our story, but also Margit and I devoting ourselves to it seemingly seven days a week, twenty hours a day!”

When I first visited the couple at the helm of Teafarm back in 2010 they had only just put their tea plants in the ground, in terracing running along the side of the driveway to the tearoom element of their business. They had no idea what might happen, but sheer belief married to months of research as to how the weather patterns of their section of the valley might behave convinced them it could be done.

Back then Nellesmann said to me, “We know we’re being a little ambitious in pushing the growing limits and that we’re going to lose plants, but we’ll 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.” Vesely added, “It’s not so much rolling the dice, as we feel strongly and intuitively that it can work.”

It remains unclear whether or not the eleven acre Teafarm has been the first to successfully grow tea on Vancouver Island, or elsewhere in Canada, but five years after they started Vesely has this to say: “People have grown it, but our focus of the commercial growing of tea on a small scale isn’t tied to being the first to do it, but to produce truly the finest quality Canadian tea we can. That’s what drives us. We’ve been made aware of some other folks growing tea on a small scale, and that’s fine, but Canada is still waiting for someone to do this on a bigger scale. Five years down the line, as we have seen with our experiment it’s all about time and terroir, and like with grapes it’s all about the minerals, the wind...everything that will affect the flavour. It’s not a competition for us; we’re inspired by the tradition of growing tea, going back thousands of years. Ours is not about winning the game, but improving it.”

As can be gleaned from Vesely’s claim above, what shines through with him and Nellesmann is that they appear to be pursuing their grand tea growing experiment as an extension or natural consequence of their deep love for, and embracing of, global tea culture and ancient traditions. This is beautifully realized via the ‘face’ of Teafarm, their gorgeous tearoom, fashioned out of a

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converted barn. Here, they set out to create a 'tea experience,' sharing the 'Way of Tea' with the thousands of visitors that now visit this increasingly famous destination annually. My wife Susan and I have visited several times, on our last occasion sampling delicious Green Tea Chiffon Cake, Earl Grey Chocolate Cake, Black Cream Tea and Lemon Ginger Tea. Yes, it was as lip-smacking as it sounds.

The tearoom also displays and sells Nellesmann's wondrous teapots (which, functional or otherwise, are beautiful works of art) and other ceramic creations, as well as a huge range of artisan blended loose leaf organic teas, single estate and estate-grown loose leaf teas, and all manner of tea-related books and paraphernalia. It is a tea lover's paradise.

"Our teahouse has evolved and become a special little world that people from all over are continuing to discover," states Vesely with understandable pride. "Part of our journey has been growing our awareness of what we actually are, and defining it; we are purveyors of fine teas, blending organic fair trade teas from all over the world, which is the integral ethos of Teafarm."

Juggling the different aspects of Teafarm has demanded incredibly long hours from the couple since deciding to grow tea in 2010 but, as Vesely reaffirms, "Certainly, at the end of the day, growing tea is our focal point. We've planted four hundred more tea plants, which are doing extremely well, with another two hundred holes dug for more seedlings going in. Eight hundred-plus plants is the path of our vision."

Considering the difficulties of growing tea in Canada, over the five years it has taken for the plants to inch towards maturity, I had imagined there must have been a whole raft of challenges and frustrations to contend with, but Vesely explains that it has been a smoother passage than they anticipated. "We've had a few setbacks to learn from," he admits, "and it's been a day-to-day, hour-to-hour monitoring scenario, but we've been lucky in that we have not encountered any kind of pest or disease, and we've managed to keep the deer away. The plants seem to be thriving in any extreme, but there hasn't really been anything that has stood in our way. If anything the greatest challenge has been finding the time to grow all three parts of the business – the farm, the clay business, and the tea business, and we just couldn't have done any of this without our fabulous staff."

It is yet to be determined exactly when the first harvest Teafarm tea will be launched, but it is getting closer and closer. When it is finally ready it will be a joyous, momentous occasion, one to celebrate and raise a glass... er, cup of tea, to the vision, determination, sweat and patience of this amazing couple. "Now we're here it's magical to be sharing it with the world," laughs Vesely, hardly able to contain his excitement. ~

*Teafarm is located at 8350 Richards Trail in the Cowichan Valley. For further information, visit [www.teafarm.ca](http://www.teafarm.ca) or call Victor Vesely and Margit Nellesmann on (250) 748 3811. That said, I highly recommend a visit to the wonderful Teafarm over a phone call or mouse clicks.*