

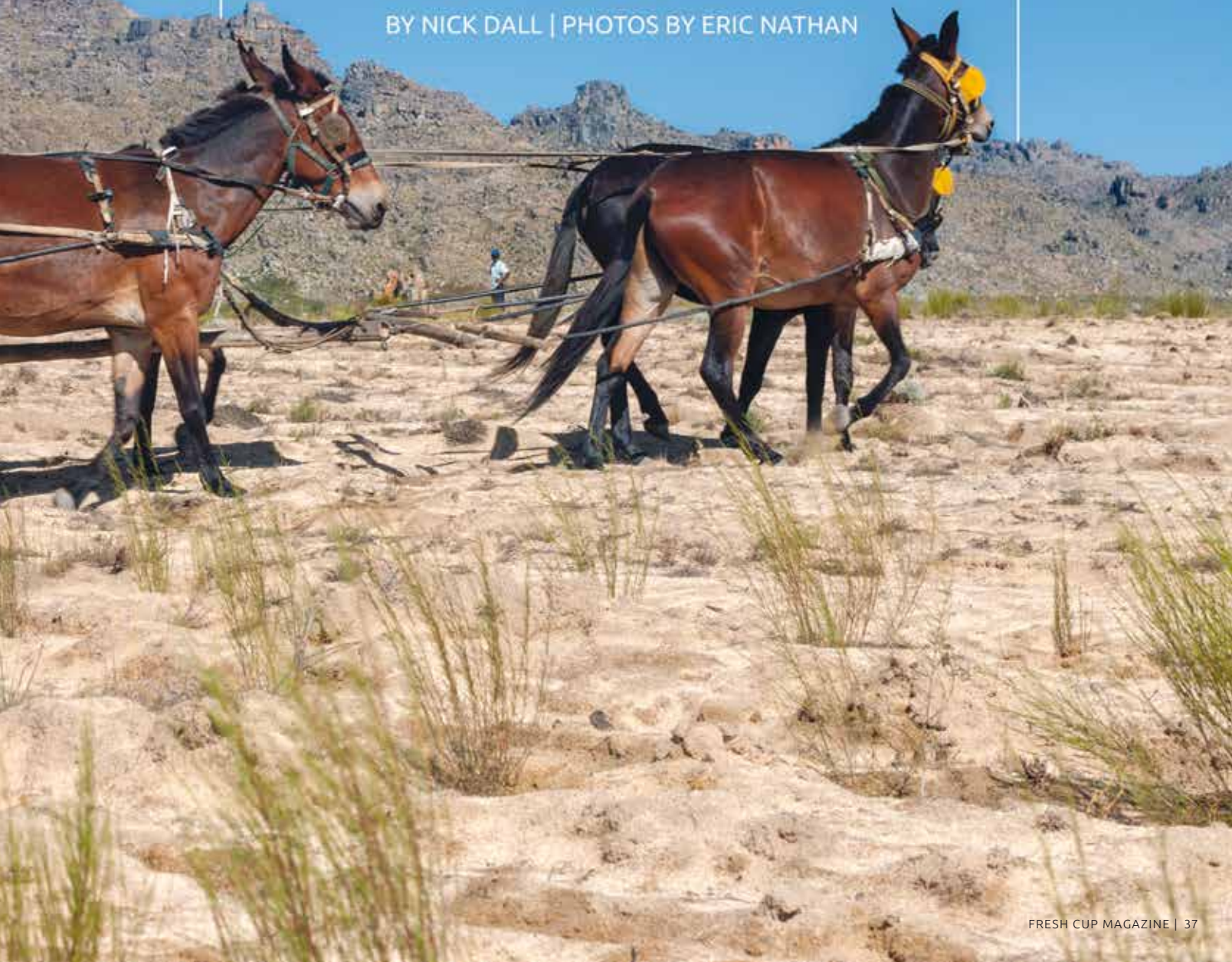


HORSE-DRAWN CART used for transporting the harvested rooibos plants in the Cederberg mountains in South Africa.

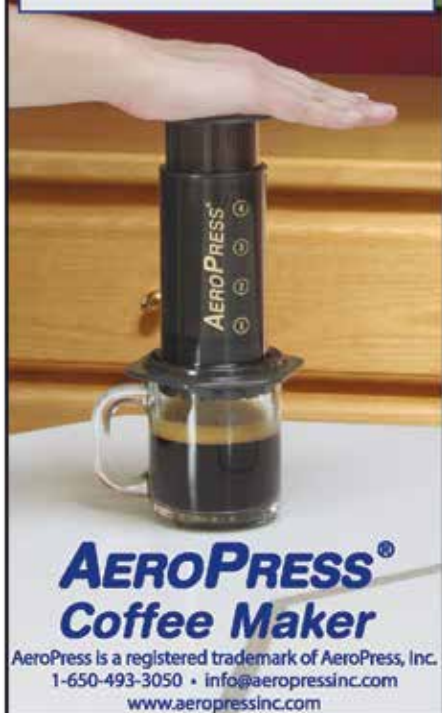
RED, RED ROOIBOS

THE HERBAL TEA
that now drinks **LIKE COFFEE**

BY NICK DALL | PHOTOS BY ERIC NATHAN



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Trendsetting baristas in locations as far-away as coffee-crazed Seattle and starchy London have discovered they can express fine-ground South African rooibos tea through their beloved GB/5s and Aurelias—and with good reason. A single shot of the brick-red liquid contains five times more antioxidants than green tea, and it blends seamlessly with steamed milk. Red lattes have lit up Instagram feeds while boosting sippers' immune systems.



The red drink trend started thousands of miles away, on a sun-parched plateau in the rugged Cederberg mountains. Here, Boltwin Tamboer harvests rooibos tea in much the same way his San forefathers would have done. Watched over by a cavern adorned with 6,000-year-old depictions of elephants, handprints, and winged medicine men, Tamboer slices through a fistful of the hardy shrub with a deft flick of his sickle before stashing the yard-long stems between his legs. He works swiftly, despite the 100-degree heat. Depending on the size and vigor of the tea bushes, he will harvest between 650 and 1,300 pounds of wet tea every day for the next two months.

The San people are recognized as the first nation of Southern Africa, and were also first to discover the healing properties of the yellow-flowered rooibos shrub, which grows only in the mountainous region close to the Cape of Good Hope. But it was the European pioneers who arrived in the hostile, drought-prone region in the 18th century who first cultivated *Aspalathus linearis* and brought the nutrient-rich tea to a wider audience.



Farmhand **BOLTWIN TAMBOER** with a bundle of harvested rooibos in the Cederberg mountains in South Africa.

In its bag and loose-leaf forms, rooibos tea has long been a South African favorite, found at the heart of church fetes and board meetings alike. It's also known for its healing properties; generations of doctors, mothers-in-law, and sports coaches have prescribed it for everything from stress and hay fever, to insomnia and muscle pain.

GOOD BECOMES GREAT

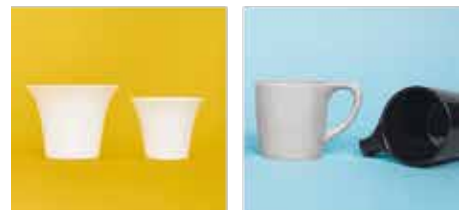
Advocates praise rooibos for its potential health benefits. Many have suggested that its antioxidants can help to protect against cancer, heart disease, and stroke.

That's all good, but when the folks who started Red Espresso first put it through a 9-bar espresso machine, good became great. By experimenting with the coarseness of the grind and sourcing the finest higher-altitude tea, they were able to produce a drink that is naturally caffeine-free and packed to the jowls with antioxidants. Lab tests confirm that Red Espresso has five times more antioxidants than green tea and 10 times more than regular rooibos tea. »



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Health benefits aside, pulled shots of rooibos boast a dark red ochre crema that wouldn't be out of place in a Roman café, not to mention an intense, earthy flavor profile that lingers long on the palate.

"We wanted to launch a healthier, caffeine-free coffee alternative that tasted great and could be enjoyed in just the same way," says Red Espresso's co-owner Pete Ethelston. "In the process, we created a whole new beverage category."

Red Espresso marries the health and café markets. Since launching 13 years ago, the company has carved a niche in nations as diverse as Portugal and South Korea, and scooped up no less than six international awards. In fact, when they were voted Best New Speciality Beverage 2008/9 by the Speciality Coffee Association of America, Red Espresso became the first tea brand ever to win SCAA recognition.

Their consumer base is also surprisingly broad. "Lots of our most loyal customers are mornings-only coffee drinkers looking for an afternoon coffee substitute," says Pete's wife, Monique Ethelston, Red Espresso's marketing director. Athletes, nutritionists, yogis,



PETE and MONIQUE ETHELSTON
with subsistence farmer Donald
Ockhuis in the Cederberg mountains.

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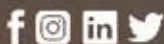
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pregnant women, and children are a few of the caffeine-adverse folks who can now participate in café culture, thanks to caffeine-free Red Espresso.

Rooibos is a household staple in South Africa, but global acceptance has proved harder to achieve. When Red Espresso launched 13 years ago, rooibos wasn't well-known outside of Africa, and the company had a hard time educating consumers about an espresso made from a product they had never heard of.

The global shift towards health and wellness has helped their product make inroads, Monique explains. "We now find consumers and cafés very open to the idea of a naturally caffeine-free alternative," she says, citing the fact that Starbucks has added rooibos tea lattes. "The beverage category we created is here to stay."

BORN OF THE LAND

We caught up with the Ethelstons while they were checking in on the upcoming harvest at Sarel and Leonie van der Merwe's farm, some four hours north of Cape Town. The following morning, we watched the sun rise over the gnarled rock formations that have made »



BERTU VAN DER MERWE holds a handful of freshly ground rooibos from a pile laid on special drying courts.

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the Cederberg mountains an international climbing mecca, before heading out to nearby Heuningvlei. As we rattle along the 15-mile road to this 25-home Moravian mission town, we learned about the outreach project Red Espresso launched to uplift local farmers and increase the quality and supply of rooibos tea.

Residents of Heuningvlei can lease land from the church for next to nothing, explains Sarel van der Merwe. “But [the land] isn’t worth much without seedlings, tractors, and money.”

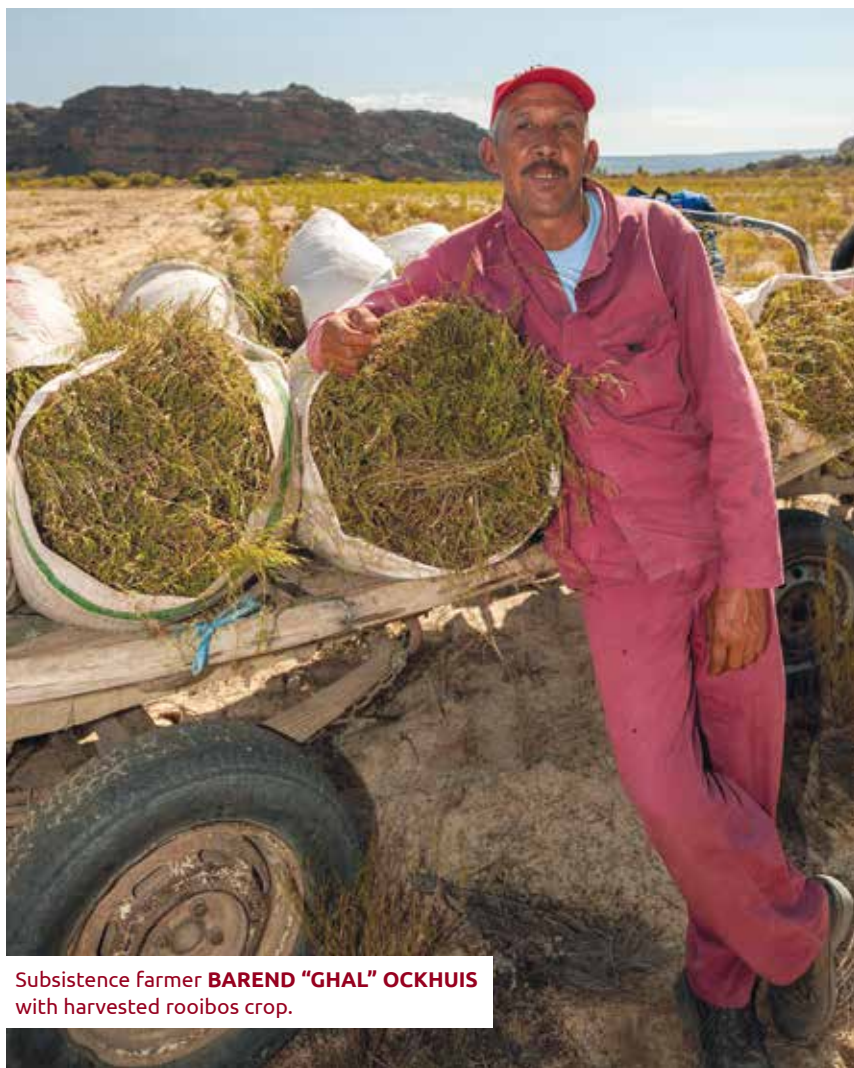
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”

Since 2015, the Ethelstons and van der Merwes have helped out with farming necessities, yielding extremely promising results. Spurred by a much-needed cash injection to this forgotten corner of the country, more farmers have come onboard every year. “Yields have been steadily improving and the quality is incredible,” Pete says.

By the time we arrive at Ghal Ockhuis’s 12-acre patch of land at 10 a.m., his rickety horse-drawn cart is already piled high with fresh rooibos. Heuningvlei’s farmers take turns assisting each other with the harvest, and today is Ghal’s turn. He’s lived in Heuningvlei all his life and has been farming—beans, rooibos, sheep—since he left school. But “everything has changed,” »



Subsistence farmer **BAREND “GHAL” OCKHUIS** with harvested rooibos crop.

ROOIBOS— FROM SEED TO CUP

The production cycle of rooibos encompasses ancient traditions and modern farming practices.



HARVESTED PLANTS



SHREDDING MACHINE



CUSTOMIZED TRACTOR

- Seedlings are planted in the cold, rainy season between June and August. Rooibos plants thrive in sandy soils where their extremely long taproots can access groundwater.
- On the unirrigated, high-altitude land where the best rooibos comes from, plants are hand-harvested once a year for five years. In their sixth year, they are plowed back into the soil and the land is left fallow for 3–5 years.
- The shrubs are hand-harvested over a two-month period, usually between January and March. This allows for daily processing of the wet tea.
- Once it arrives at the processing facility, the plant—stems, twigs, leaves, and all—is put through a shredding machine.
- This fine green “mulch” is then laid out in a narrow stripe on a concrete tea court and left to oxidize overnight.
- The following morning, a customized tractor attachment sprays the tea, which has now turned a rich ochre.
- After drying in the sun for seven hours, the tea is packed into 900-pound bags and sent to a nearby factory for steam pasteurizing and quality control.
- The next stop is Red Espresso HQ, where the tea is ground to an espresso-like consistency. The tea is so tough that the grinder blades have to be replaced every ton!
- Finally, the grinds are packaged into bags or pods, and distributed around the world.

3 WAYS TO MAKE RED ESPRESSO



ESPRESSO MACHINE: Scoop 14 grams of Red Espresso into a Red Espresso RCP basket or a standard double filter basket (no need to tamp) and express a double shot (2 ounces).



AEROPRESS: Dose 14 grams Red Espresso, add hot water (195 degrees F), stir, and allow to brew for 1 minute before expressing.



FRENCH PRESS: Dose 14 grams Red Espresso per cup, add hot water, and stir. Allow to brew for 2–3 minutes before gently plunging.

RECIPES



RED LATTE: Express a double shot of Red Espresso. Top with steamed milk of your choice. Serve with honey and cinnamon.



COLD BREW RED: Brew in a ratio of 10:1 (water to Red Espresso) for 12 hours.



FRESH RED ICED TEA: Fill a 16-ounce glass with ice and 8 ounces apple juice. Add a double shot of red espresso. Garnish with fresh mint.

Ghal says, “since Pete and Sarel started to give me seedlings and plow my land.”

In exchange for his two tons of tea, Ghal is paid the kind of money his parents and grandparents could only have dreamed of, receiving one lump-sum payment every year. “Tea is making a difference for my generation,” he says.



Measuring out ground **RED ESPRESSO**

Later that afternoon, as we prepare to leave the farm, two days of oppressive heat come to a head in a tumultuous thunderstorm. Instead of seeking cover, Pete and Monique Ethelston stand arms outstretched in the center of the tea court, allowing the plump desert raindrops to drench them. In an area that only receives six inches of rain a year, every drop counts, bringing with it the promise of better tea and higher yields.

And that’s good news for hipsters, dieticians, gym instructors, and farmers like Ghal Ockhuis. ☕

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