

Will Drought Eat my Tea?

TEA is as much a tradition in many households as wine is, after an evening meal. In my household, my parents, mother and father alike used to request their after-supper cup of tea almost daily (causing me and my siblings to stay as far away from the lounge as possible, until of course your name got called up with that loud voice from my old man).

Then we knew our time was up. For a while Five Roses was their favourite, until my mother discovered Rooibos. She would switch from Five Roses to Rooibos – always citing how good tea was for their general well-being

I guess I could blame that for my love-hate relationship with tea, for I don't drink tea unless I am compelled by circumstances, mainly, travelling and being in a hotel for breakfast. I have my Rooibos cup to blend in – always looks so posh, so “British”, and reminds one of those old TV series where the ladies are dressed up with a cup in hand. Occasionally, I do feel exhausted and worn out and then I reach for my Rooibos herbal tea or another similar blend.

I see many who cannot make a single hour after getting up before sipping coffee – myself included - and I am of the view there are equally as many, or a significant share, who feel the same about TEA. What is in this TEA that makes this industry lucrative and many a consumer swear they drink nothing else but Rooibos?

The Consumer's Motivation Rooibos Tea drinkers are mainly health conscious. A young woman in her early 20s, said she drinks nothing else but a “healthy cup of Rooibos.” A 50 something single mom prefers Rooibos as it is a “healthy natural drink, with no caffeine or preservatives.”

The demand certainly has been on the increase, with supply not coming on as quick. In fact, the basic laws of economics dictate that, with increased demand and a lack of adequate supply to keep up, there may be some price increases on the horizon. Yet whether this

would influence consumers and dissuade them from their morning or late night cup is not exact science.

One consumer professed that she would rather cut out some of her “non-healthy products that add no value to her health” if she found the cost of keeping up her regimen of a daily cup of Rooibos too pricey.

Rooibos Tea is well known as a beverage that has amazing calming effects – it is used by many for relaxation and offers the added benefit of no caffeine extracts. There have been several studies published on the positive effects of Rooibos Tea and the extracts thereof. Some attribute glowing skin to their religious use and application of Rooibos based creams.

Take for example a study published on the Rooibos Council – South Africa website (www.sarooibos.co.za) and conducted by Dr Tandeka Magcwebeba. In this study, Dr Magcwebeba stated that there were indications that the Rooibos extracts may be able to prevent the development of skin cancer.

Another study published in 2009 by Japanese scientists, as reported on “Rooibos – so much more than a tea substitute, 22 January, 2013” (<http://www.nyrnaturalnews.com/article/rooibos-so-muchmore- than-a-tea-substitute/>) focused on the abundant antioxidants in Rooibos Tea.

The findings showed that aspalathin and nothofagin have strong anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, which may prevent DNA damage and inflammation.

The history of Rooibos Tea has its origins firmly rooted in the Republic of South Africa of course. Several sources visited affirm that the Khoisan tribe used this tea as a herbal medicine for various ailments before it was adopted by the Dutch settlers in the Cape as an alternative to black tea. Globally, the demand for this beverage has soared and this has led to price increases.

How has the lack of rainfall affected Rooibos Tea production, and does the impact severely threaten the production, supply and (therefore) pricing of this precious commodity? The answer, it seems, depends on who you ask.

As early as 2013, in an online article published by then SAPA (<http://www.iol.co.za/business/news/rooibos-tea-prices-set-to-rise-1616244>), there were worrying concerns that the supply of Rooibos would pale in comparison to demand that had increased and was expected to affect mainly exports of the commodity. However, there is more to the uneven scale of demand versus supply; the drought, as the result of unnatural weather patterns due to El Nino that the continent and South Africa have experienced since 2015.

Rainfall is an integral part in the production of tea, it follows that the scarcity of rainfall over the 2015 - 2016 period, will affect the production of Rooibos. Ernest du Toit, spokesperson for the Rooibos Council – South Africa, has lamented the challenges faced by Rooibos farmers, but at the time of the interview, there was no clear determination as to the true impact of the drought on the supply for 2016.

The harvest happens around April or May. However, he mentioned that the impact would be significant. “The price of Rooibos will also be affected,” he noted. “It is impossible to say to what extent the price will increase by at this stage, since pricing is determined by each company or producer and increases are not set as an industry.

Each company or producer will independently determine their own views based on their business imperatives and pricing strategies.”

The situation also affects farming practises. Changing climate patterns have slowly been forcing businesses to look at new ways of adapting to severe heat and a lack of rainfall. Although Rooibos farmers have adapted their processes to minimum tillage and conservation agriculture in order to preserve moisture and humus in the soil, the current drought conditions have been severe and the impact may be significant.

The Rooibos Tea industry is touted as lucrative to the farmers and the economy as well. For many small scale farmers, the benefits derived from growing this tea are immense. But there have been some concerns that the rise in popularity of Rooibos Tea (not only amongst South African consumers, but the world at large) may be at a cost to the environment.

Some farmers have taken proactive steps towards farming in a responsible manner. These are mainly small-scale Rooibos farmers in the Cape. The Wupperthal Tea Association, formed in 1998, has achieved a great deal of success in Rooibos tea farming and this has boosted the financial wellbeing of the farmers in the co-op.

This Association grew from 16 members when it was formed to a number in excess of 150 members. By 2005, the Wupperthal Association, in the Cederberg Mountains, received Fair Trade Certification. Another small scale Rooibos farming co-op is the “The Heiveld.”

A resilient Plant – Is it under Threat?

A report published in a Bloomberg article (Bloomberg, April 2012) quoted the South African National Biodiversity’s Climate and Bioadaptation Unit Head as assuring that the Rooibos plant is resilient and it has adapted to harsh conditions. According to the article, the risk to the survival of the plant is not immediate.

The plant certainly can survive even the harshest conditions, even zero degrees Celsius and rising levels, including a blistering 48 degrees Celsius in summer.

Some are not so optimistic about the future of the plant, unless sustainable farming practices are built into the value chain. Jessica Bonin, Managing Founder of “Lady Bonins Tea” (<http://ladyboninstea.com>), believes that the challenges currently facing Rooibos production are daunting. “It has seen low yield and up to 70 percent increase in Rooibos cost due to the shortage,” Bonin states. “Rooibos is a legume - thus it is a nitrogen fixer and has small nodules on its root system that convert chemicals in the air

into usable substances in the soil, which directly benefit the growth of surrounding plant life.” Rooibos does this for the community, not for itself.

Bonin asserts that once the Rooibos is taken out of its ecosystem, such as when you create mono crop fields, it loses its ability to function at optimum. That, says Bonin, results in the soil health declining and the Rooibos plants cannot adapt to changing weather or drought. The plants then die off, having a detrimental effect on the surrounding Fynbos. “This is the sad state of commercial farming,” laments Bonin.

Implementing biodiverse sustainable farming practices, or wild growing methods, has immense benefits. According to Bonin, the long term effects of plant and soil health - as well as far less plant deaths - are overwhelming. Bonin works with a local cooperative that has been using these methods since the beginning.

She believes that this process is the only way forward in order to ensure a sustainable Rooibos industry, as well as a healthy fynbos ecosystem.

Bonin sounds positive with regards the surge in consumer demand for Rooibos Tea. It is her view that an increased demand will motivate producers to shift farming practices which will benefit the consumer with a healthier product, the environment which now thrives, and farmers who now see fair compensation. She argues that if the price increase is shocking to the consumer, it may drive the inquiry to understand the source of what they consume and the methods of the process therein.

Local communities within the area of the Cederberg Mountains also reap the benefits of the flourishing industry.

The Rooibos consumer market has steadily grown, of course, notwithstanding the sluggish growth of the South African economy. Bonin’s concern is that consumers will feel the pinch in the price increase of Rooibos Tea “as this cuts across the board, i.e. local and international markets”.

“Local companies are now competing with international companies, without having the same currency strength,” she adds. “The only hope is that it levels out the playing field between biodiverse producers and commercial farmers in terms of prices. We ideally want the consumer to support better farming practices and better produce.”

Time will tell if the prevailing weather patterns will have a major negative impact on the yields, in the medium or long term, and whether, as Bonin asserted, there has to be a shift in farming practices (even from the big companies in the industry) to guarantee or give hope for the sustainability of this most loved commodity, for generations to come.

By Zanele Mlambo