

## Assam tea on Lufthansa menu brings cheer to industry

German airlines Lufthansa appears set to have Assam tea on its in-flight menu, a move that has brought cheer to the northeast Indian state's massive tea industry.

'We are aware of the move and are extremely happy. Lufthansa not only can serve as a brand ambassador for Assam tea, but can give passengers a delightful experience of the high quality tea produce from the state,' Dhiraj Kakaty, head of the Indian Tea Association's Assam Branch, told IANS.

The Indian Tea Board is talking to the German airline in this connection and the response from Lufthansa has been 'positive', a Tea Board official said.

The tea chosen is the best quality Assam Orthodox variety, that can compete favourably with the other well known varieties from elsewhere in India -- the delicately flavoured Darjeeling and the stronger Nilgiri teas.

'The Second Flush Assam Orthodox is in any case the best tea in the world and a leading international airline picking up this variety to serve its passengers in the skies is great news,' Kakaty said.

Germany, Kakaty said, is already familiar with the Second Flush Orthodox tea from Assam, grown during the best tea-growing season of May-June in the state.

'Plantations in Assam are already exporting an estimated five to six million kg of Second Flush Orthodox tea to Germany. It is only a matter of time before people in Germany would endorse it as their favourite brand of tea,' Kakaty said.

Asked to comment on fears about the image of Assam Tea taking a beating just in case the best quality produce is not served on these flights, Kakaty said: 'I don't think there is anything to fear as any reputed airline would take due care to pick up the best produce.'

Orthodox tea manufactured in Assam is in the process of getting the much sought after Geographical Indication Certificate, equivalent to a patent. Darjeeling tea, in 2003, got itself registered under the Geographical Indications (GI) provisions.

The GI certification protects indications identifying goods with certain special characteristics that originate in a particular geographical region.

'We are examining the possibility of covering Assam as a single geographical area with regard to the tea produced in the state,' Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh had said recently.

Assam is considered the heart of the tea industry in India -- the world's largest tea producer -- and accounts for about 55 percent of the country's total annual tea production of about 928 million kg.

Assam tea is known for its strong and rich flavour, besides a deep amber colour with a malty character.

Historical records show that Robert Bruce, a British trader, found wild tea plants near Jorhat in eastern Assam with the help of a local Singpho tribal chieftain in 1823. Robert Bruce died soon after and his plan to establish a nursery was followed up by his brother Charles, who was then an employee of the East India Company.

According to Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, it was not until December 1834 when Charles sent samples to Calcutta (now Kolkata) that the plant was confirmed to be tea.

In the early 1830s, Charles set up the first tea plantation in eastern Assam's Sadiya town and shipped 12 chests of tea to London in 1838.

The effort of the Bruce brothers helped pioneer the tea industry in the country and ended China's position as the world's pre-eminent supplier of the beverage.

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