

In The Land Of Wine And Tea

WRITTEN BY MARTIN BOHÁČIK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FILIPA LINDMARK

“For us, it’s all about tea,” says Nina as she tops up the teapot. “It’s still hard to believe that we are actually drinking our own *colheita!*” In a transparent glass pot, elegantly swirled yellow-green leaves are slowly unfurling. These leaves, fresh from the field, are Nina’s first harvest: *colheita*, as the Portuguese call it. It took seven years of care, nurturing and learning about tea-making before she was able to produce the first small batch. A truly Portuguese batch. One that, as if by a stroke of fate, came from the land of camellias.

Seven years ago, Nina Gruntkowski, a German-born radio journalist, and her husband, Dirk Niepoort, a fifth-generation Portuguese wine maker, decided to transform an old family vineyard into a tea farm. A small patch of land 30 kilometres north of Porto became a place of significance — it is the only tea farm in mainland Portugal since the times of Elise, the Countess of Edla, who is famed to have grown the first Portuguese tea in Sintra in the 19th century.

“We made our very first batch a few years ago when our tea plants, still babies at that time, were not yet ready for a proper harvest. We picked just a few leaves to test the material, to see if they could offer anything interesting.” Little did they know that when their Japanese partners came to visit, they would ask for a taster. Nina, too uncertain and even embarrassed, timorously brewed their very first leaves and offered them to the Morimotos. Their reaction sealed the deal! “They recognised the potential and were only too keen to help us develop our own production!” recalls Nina.

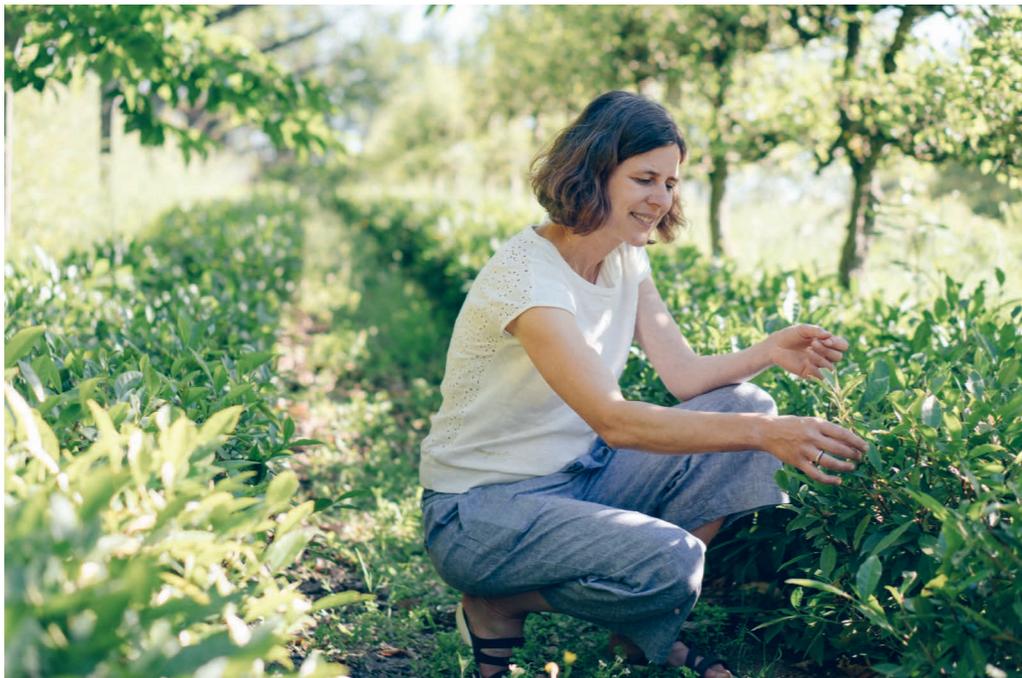




The idea of having her own tea farm completely took over Nina. She had always been a tea drinker, but just for degustation — it brought her pleasure. And while she loved her radio work, all her effort was always put into just a fleeting moment and then it was gone. She wanted to create something more tangible, more lasting. Discovering that tea comes from a camellia sparked her interest: after all, the coastal line along Northern Portugal where she lives is known for its abundance of all kinds of camellias. It was the perfect idea for her company: *Chá Camélia*.

Portugal being a very coffee-oriented country, it was not easy to come by good quality tea. She had to get hers from tea shops in Germany. Ironically, the Portuguese have a very sentimental connection to tea: their own Catarina de Bragança, daughter of Portugal's King João IV and queen consort of England's King Charles II, was credited with having brought tea to England. This may precisely be a reason for the Portuguese being very curious about tea these days, however unfamiliar they may be with it.

The venture started off with the help of the Morimotos, a seasoned tea-grower couple from Japan, who have been producing their teas for decades. Because it would have taken about six years for them to start their own production, they wanted to first bring over premium Japanese teas and introduce them to the local market. They were taught the bulk of tea-growing by the Morimotos, who have also been supplying Nina and Dirk's tea business with premium, organic teas since its inception.



“A lot of our regular customers started with blends, but then turned to pure teas.”

Aware that offering just the pure leaf might be a hard sell, they experimented with local herbs that would complement the Japanese flavour, resulting in a selection of very appealing blends: *sencha* or *bancha* with Portuguese lemongrass or a mix of culinary and perfumery roses from the Arabian peninsula, France and Portugal. Some of these roses even grow in their own *quinta* — the estate where their original vineyard was. They also offer a *genmaicha*, which is a creative blend of *sencha* with roasted rice and a Portuguese twist of elderberry flowers and yarrow. This approach opened many doors and locals became very receptive to it. “A lot of our regular customers started with blends, but then turned to pure teas,” explains Nina.

Their *quinta* comprises two hectares of land: one half planted with several varieties of *Camellia sinensis*, and the other half given over to mature trees and other plants. Some of the camellias are Japanese varieties cultivated throughout Portugal, while others are collected from local gardens but of unknown origin.



“We didn’t want to just copy. We wanted to create something of our own, put our own mark on the leaf.”



“Of course, with the help and instruction from the Morimotos, the core of our production is based on Japanese practices. However, we didn’t want to just copy. We wanted to create something of our own, put our own mark on the leaf. The last thing we wanted to do was to make a bad Japanese tea.

“Our scale is still very small and we could not exactly replicate the methods used in Japan, where they rely heavily on huge machinery. Besides, we like to improvise and not necessarily do it by the book,” acknowledges Nina. “We still use vaporisation to stop oxidation. The Morimotos gave us their own old wok, the very one which they used when they first started their business. It’s very special to us, there is a lot of sentiment in it.”

The rolling of their leaves is inspired by China where it is more common to roll them by hand. It gives the tea a somewhat *biluochun* look — a round, snail-like shape, each leaf individually rolled into a spiral. “We were very pleased with the result. Last year’s harvest was still experimental, but it gave us a very clear idea of what we wanted to, and could, achieve. This tea has a unique flavour, asserting its own (brand new) terroir and processing methods. It is its own thing, it’s not trying to be a copy or a version of something else,” explains Nina.





“It’s very important to us that we do everything organically and in a sustainable way, employing biodynamic methods.”

The main house and office of the *quinta* sits under a thick canopy of large maples, allowing only thin rays of sunshine to penetrate the foliage. The play of shadows — on the walls outside, and inside the house through the window panes — is mesmerising. There is the faint sound of a wind chime playing somewhere. Various trees and plants — from maples and pines to grapes, kiwis and roses — encircle the estate, enriching the soil and strengthening the ecosystem.

“It’s very important to us that we do everything organically and in a sustainable way, employing biodynamic methods. Fortunately, our *quinta* — which is entirely organically certified — is not that large so we can manage to manually tend to the fields: planting, weeding, nurturing.” It sounds idyllic, but walking around the estate it becomes clear that it is back-breaking work, especially in the beautiful but unforgiving sun.

Nina leads us to their factory: a large, covered open space with a long shelf full of teapots and cups, a wall filled with photographs of Nina, Dirk and the team at *Chá Camélia*, as well as many other helpers, tending to the fields, collecting leaves, brewing tea. In the corner, at the end of a short row of small machines used at various stages of the production process, sits a large wok.

“Early on, when we visited the Morimotos in Japan, we were looking for a pan to fry our tea. The Morimotos very kindly gifted this old pan to us. It meant the world to me. But when we were transporting it from Japan, unfortunately, it must have been handled roughly and it cracked!” Nina points to a long silver line stretching from the edge of the pan all the way to the middle. “My heart broke when I saw it,” laments Nina. “It carried so much history and emotional attachment that I could not give up on it. By a stroke of luck, we managed to find a specialist who was able to fix it,” Nina smiles.

It is as if the silver line added a new chapter to its history, marking the transition from its original owner to a new one. It looks older now, more experienced. The Japanese believe that old broken things that have been mended should be proudly displayed as such. One should not try and hide their defects. This art is called *kintsugi* and there is definitely something *kintsugi*-esque about this wok.





Around the *quinta* we see rows of tea bushes in different stages of growth: some quite uniform like those we saw in Japan, others just small saplings. “Our current capacity is 12,000 bushes, of which a majority is still not ready to harvest. Over the next four years the young bushes will mature, increasing our yield. People often ask us how much volume we can produce, but we don’t really care, nor can we really estimate it. We can make a lot of low quality tea or just a little of the premium type. It’s relative. We focus on high quality and that’s why we created *O Nosso Chá (Our Tea)* as our flagship variety,” beams Nina.

On a trip to South Korea a few years ago, Nina and Dirk came across a tea stored in cedar boxes, which gave it a very distinct aroma. They tried it, but were not much impressed by it. Then it struck them: “We thought we could do something more interesting. We had all these old, unused wine barrels. As long as we could find the right *wulong*, we could infuse it with a wine aroma!” Their expectations were not very high, but they set aside ten kilos of a Chinese *wulong* and stored it in a wine cask.

What came out of it was very unexpected. “We were blown away by how well the tea and the aroma blended! And the feedback from customers was incredible! We had to expand production after a high profile client from Macau ordered 100 kilos of this new *pipachá* (“port wine cask tea”). Now we have a separate cellar dedicated to maturing *wulongs* in port wine casks!” Nina laughs. Although it sounds rather unusual, the concept is very much the same as that for making jasmine tea. The tea simply absorbs the scent of its surroundings over a period of time, resulting in a completely different experience.

Growing tea is only a part of their efforts. As they have been getting their teas from Japan for the past eight years, they have built a structure of workshops, courses, tastings and other educational activities to entice people in and spread the interest in tea. And enthusiasm is growing. “It’s incredibly satisfying to know that our work draws more people in and they keep coming back! After all, this has always been our intention: bring more people round to tea.” ◉