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S. Fla. to get first coffee plantation

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Florida coffee drinkers may soon wake up to a Broward-grown brew.

J.C. Nadeau, as if an alchemist-turned-coffee-roaster, is betting his locally grown coffee will be tastier and more pure than pricier blends.

The Coconut Creek resident is importing Colombian coffee plants that are customized for Florida's unique soil. Within the next week, he says, a caffeinated crop will go into the ground on a leased, 10-acre patch of farmland in western Davie.

State farm officials are closely watching Nadeau's progress. If he succeeds, his would be the first commercial coffee plantation in Florida.

"It is obviously a somewhat risky venture, growing coffee in this latitude," said Terry McElroy, a Florida Agriculture Department spokesman. "But it shows incredible entrepreneurial spirit."

Nadeau said he has invested \$1 million of his own money in the project, envisioning a chain of coffee shops and carts in addition to plantations. He's received no assistance from the state, although he says the city of Davie leased him at a low price community land it wanted to preserve as agricultural green space.

If all goes as planned, Nadeau expects to harvest in about eight months 15,000 pounds of beans from an initial planting of 5,000 coffee trees.

Local agriculture boosters are hopeful about the crop.

"There's always the possibility that this could develop into something that replaces citrus and maintains green space," said Fred Segal, president of the Broward Farm Bureau.

THE CLIMATE QUESTION

But Florida's winter climate, while ideal for snowbirds and vacationers, may be too cold for the finicky coffee plant, which thrives at temperatures between 55 and 80 degrees. While South Florida's temperatures normally stay in that range, the occasional freeze or bout of cold weather could ruin a crop.

Jonathan Crane, a tropical-fruit-crop specialist at the University of Florida's Tropical Research and Education Center in Homestead, says the region's high humidity during the summer also can weaken coffee plants.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture once maintained a coffee collection near the coast in southern Miami-Dade County, but agronomists eventually gave up and found it easier to grow cacao instead.

"If coffee could be grown here commercially," said Crane, "it would already be commercially cultivated here."

The proof is in the product, counters Nadeau, who says he's grown many successful test plants in back yards throughout the region. He's developed a closed-loop irrigation system with raised planting beds that he says will help resist cold and keep the coffee well drained.

The white-haired Nadeau, 60, turned to custom coffee growing shortly after retirement, when his dozen or so daily cups of coffee began irritating his stomach.

Nadeau, who once ran his own gold refinery in Quebec, learned that much of the coffee produced commercially includes impurities such as ground twigs, leaves, sawdust and stones.

"Something didn't taste right," he said.

STOMACH PAINS

Rather than give up his cherished drink, he decided to create a better brew. In early 2002, he began planting coffee bushes throughout Broward County and South Florida. Those first bushes bore deep red cherries, which he de-pulped, fermented, roasted and dried on his own.

That first taste, he said, was heavenly.

'I said, 'Wow, this is a different world, this is the real thing.' "

He found a small coffee plantation in Colombia willing to grow arabica beans in conditions that would mimic South Florida's alkaline soil and heavy moisture.

Nadeau said an alkaline tinge, it turned out, produced a hearty, rich-bodied brew that isn't as harsh on sensitive stomachs.

To test his concept, Nadeau commissioned a small, trailer-sized mobile coffee roastery to visit farmer's markets around Broward. Now semi-permanently installed at Bob Roth's New River Groves in Davie, the roastery has already developed loyal fans.

Joe Truscello works in Lighthouse Point, but makes a coffee run to Davie nearly every day. On a recent Thursday, he and his girlfriend dropped by for a noontime fix.

"It doesn't have a bitter aftertaste," he said as Nadeau's partner Jairo Noriega prepared his usual, an iced coffee with an extra shot of espresso.

Nadeau hopes his brightly colored cart, which operates as Wagon Wheel Coffee Roaster will launch a regional chain.

As he prepares his coffee plantation, he's also seeking franchisees to run their own Wagon Wheel cart or store.

"We have reinvented the wheel," he said. ``We're bringing back the days when people drank real coffee."