

Makaibari cuppa for cognac price

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KOLKATA: A special lot of handcrafted tea from the 155-year-old Makaibari Tea Estate in Kurseong sold recently for \$1850 (around Rs 1.11 lakh) a kilo, thus becoming the most expensive Indian tea ever sold.

Three buyers from UK, USA and Japan bought 20 kilos of this silver-tips imperial organic tea to sell to select buyers. For the end-buyers, this tea will cost nothing less than Rs 700 a cup if brewed at home. And if you fancy a cup of this Makaibari tea at a five-star hotel, it would set you back by Rs 4,500 and Rs 5,000 — the same as a peg of rare Scotch like Blue Label Limited Edition or a Remy Martin Cognac.

Rudra Chatterjee, executive director of Luxmi Tea, which recently bought Makaibari, said that it has sold this organic tea to Hampstead Tea & Coffee of UK, Eco Prima Inc of the US and Makaibari Japan Ltd. "Makaibari Japan is an independent company run by Yoko Ishi, who exclusively buys Makaibari tea. This time they have bought 5 kg of this tea. Hampstead, one of our old customers, has taken 10 kg and the rest was bought by the American company," he added.

Makaibari chairman Rajah Banerjee said their tea estate held the earlier record as well. Makaibari tea was the record holder at Beijing Tea Auctions in 2006, where it sold for \$1800 a kilo, and at Calcutta Auctions in 2003 where one lot sold for \$450 a kg. "This unique tea (the one sold recently) is a handmade semi-fermented light liquoring Oolong Tea that captures the essence of summer solstice. It was manufactured exclusively on June 13, nine days before summer solstice. This ensures the highest degree of flavor for any vegetation," said Banerjee, a fourth-generation owner of Makaibari before he sold it to Luxmi Tea earlier this year.

The Japanese buyer, Ishi, said: "We always expect the world's best tea from Makaibari. The best produce from Makaibari has a loyal following among our Japanese customers. We supply Silver Tips to Ritz Carlton Tokyo Roppongi Hotel, where customers buy Makaibari Silver Needles Tea at \$45 (a little over Rs 2,700) per pot."

President of Darjeeling Tea Association S S Bageria told TOI that this lot of Makaibari tea has set a new record not only for Darjeeling, but all Indian tea. Sanjay Bansal, former president of the association, agreed with Bageria that at \$1850 a kilo, this would be the highest price fetched by any Indian tea. "I cannot recall any price higher than this," he said.

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Officials of Calcutta Tea Traders Association agreed with Banerjee. "Makaibari tea holds the record for fetching the highest ever price — \$450 a kilo — in an Indian auction. But at that time the exchange rate was Rs 46 a dollar whereas it is a little over Rs 60 a dollar now," an official said.

Chatterjee, the young owner of the garden, is obviously delighted at his estate's tea creating yet another record. "I am delighted that Makaibari continues to produce exceptional tea. After Luxmi's acquisition of Makaibari, our first priority was to ensure that only the most exceptional teas are produced. Makaibari is one of Bengal's and India's

treasures," he said.

