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In a first, Makaibari registers harvest of tea leaves in winter

The leaves were processed into 10kg of tea, and fashionably named Yule Flush

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A file photo of the Makaibari tea estate in Darjeeling. Its workers collected 50kg of tea leaves before Christmas. Photo: Indranil Bhounik/Mint

Kolkata: This Christmas, Sanjay Das, manager of Makaibari tea estate in Darjeeling district, had a special gift for his boss, Rudra Chatterjee. Over almost three days,

workers at the estate had collected 50kg of tea leaves days ahead of Christmas—a first for this time of the year when bushes typically fall asleep.

The leaves were processed into 10kg of tea, and fashionably named Yule Flush. “The tea turned out to very good, though not of the first or second flush quality,” said Chatterjee, the owner of Makaibari.

It fetched a “respectable price”, and is likely to be resold at a “substantial premium” by its Japanese buyer, he added.

Harvesting in tea estates in Darjeeling normally stops in mid-November and remains suspended during the winter months. This year, because the bushes got rest in the peak season of harvesting, some lower elevation estates had fresh leaves flushing even during the end of December.

The quantity was small, but it shows the bushes may have benefitted from the 104-day strike in Darjeeling last year.

Even at the end of December, there was moisture in the soil and the bushes were found to be well-nourished, said Das, adding that at Makaibari, workers started to remove weeds from the bushes as soon as the strike was lifted.

“It helped to have started early,” said Das, who is expecting a “bumper crop” next year.

The temperature was conducive in low elevation estates, said Krishan Katyal, chairman of J. Thomas and Co. and an expert on Darjeeling tea estates. At higher elevation estates, it was too cold for bushes to flush. “The bushes have undoubtedly benefitted from the rest, which they haven’t ever got in the past 100 years,” he said.

Because the bushes were overgrown and had to undergo deep pruning this year, the yield next season, starting in March, may initially be a little thin, according to Katyal. “But April onwards, the bushes will start to flush fully and I am expecting the crop next year to be of very good quality,” he said.

Every year, in early winter, some estates at lower elevation produce small quantities of tea, said D.P. Maheshwari, managing director at Jay Shree Tea and Industries Ltd.

For his own company, the production in early winter is as little as 1.5% of the total annual yield, but this year, because of the disruption in supply of Darjeeling tea, prices were “much firmer”, Maheshwari said.

Some estates, however, chose not to harvest.

S.S. Bagaria, chairman of the Bagaria group, which owns at least three estates in Darjeeling, said he could have produced around 15kg of tea, but opted not to harvest so that the workers could be fully deployed in maintenance of the bushes.

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