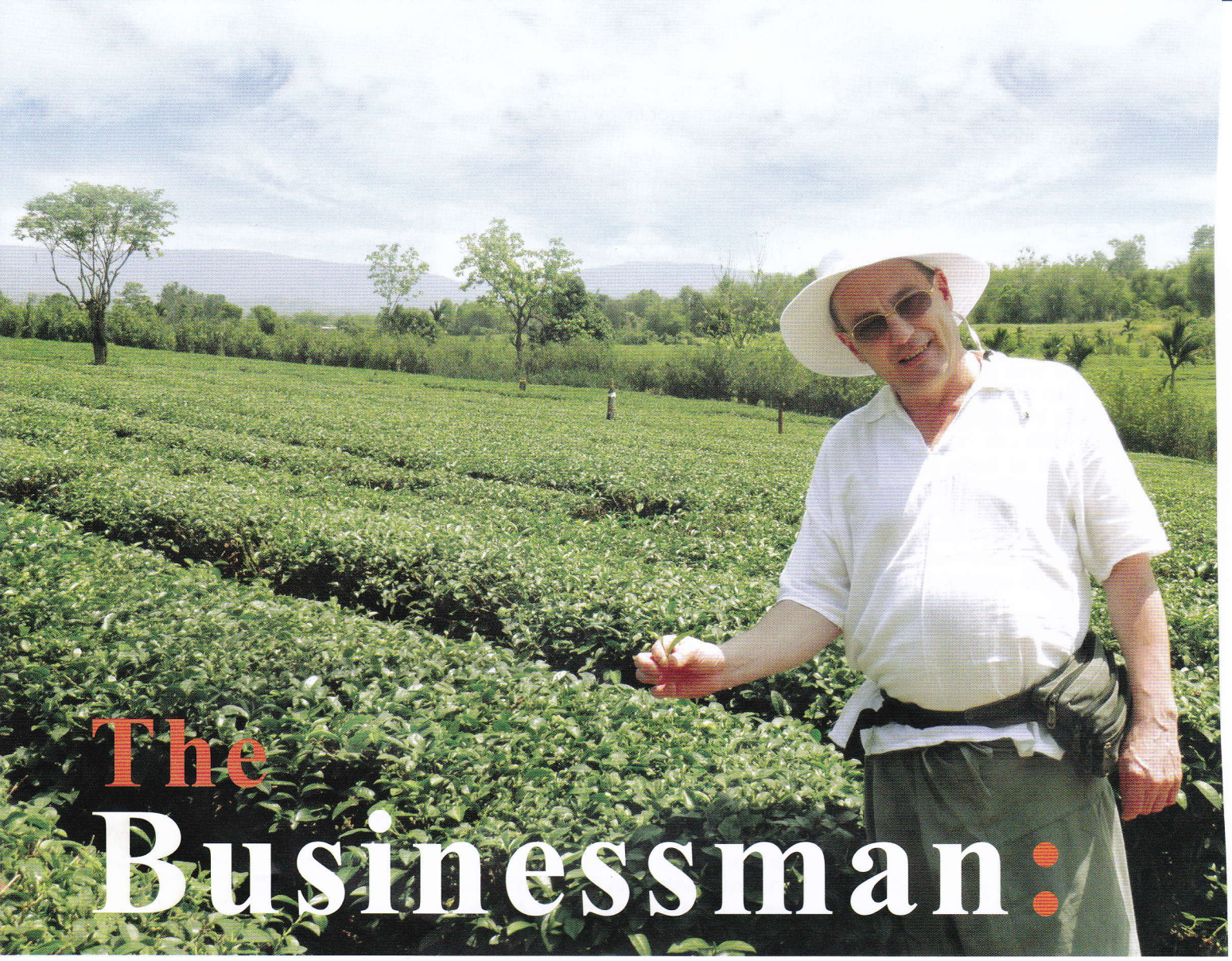

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The Businessman:

How an Englishman who loves his cuppa aims to brew up foreign interest in Thai tea

By Robert Tilley

It's tea time on a windy mountainside in Northern Thailand, and John Wombwell sips appreciatively at a cup of his favorite brew.

"It's an Oolong green tea, my favorite," he says. "It has a sweet, creamy texture and is easy on the palate. I drink it every day."

There's no shortage of John's favorite tea, which grows in abundance on a plantation which he promotes internationally. The Oolong and four other varieties grown on the Daokrajai estate near Mae Salong in Chiang Rai Province, are sold at two restaurants in Dubai and at London's prestigious Royal Lancaster Hotel. Hours after our teatime chat he received an inquiry from Russia's largest tea importer.

The Dubai contract marks John's entry into a market he knows well, having worked in the Middle East for seven years. "Tea is the beverage of choice in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and I hope that before long Thailand's teas will be available there on a wide scale."

John is an electronics engineer by profession, but has always been an appreciative tea-drinker—"I remember my grandmother, a farmer's wife in England, and her utter disdain for tea-bags, and I suppose something of her attitude rubbed off on me."

His interest in the teas of Northern Thailand was sparked by an item on the Internet. Further inquiry led him to discover an estate near Mae Salong, the center of tea-growing in Northern Thailand and of an agricultural area mostly farmed by hill tribe villagers and descendants of Chinese refugees from the 1949 Communist takeover.

01 John Wombwell helps pick the tea at the Daokrajai estate in Northern Thailand

02 Akha women are among the estate's most loyal workers

03-04 The Daokrajai estate is set among spectacular mountain scenery

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John offered to help market the tea, in Thailand and abroad. "It's been three years of quite hard work but certainly a worthwhile project," he says with almost missionary zeal.

He makes sure that the tea is grown organically. "Growers in China like to use chemical insecticides and fertilizer, but they're banned at the Daokrajai estate," he said.

The 1,400 rai estate has been worked for nearly 40 years by the same family, who have taken John into their hearts, enthusiastically backing his efforts to market the tea outside Thailand. They have a lot of tea to sell—1,800 tons in a good year.

John's technical background comes in handy and he's currently working on an electronic device to measure water content of the soil. " The upland, cool conditions around Mae Salong are ideal for growing tea, but this will assist growers in controlling moisture levels, which are critical."

If John's technical improvement and marketing expertise open wealthy overseas markets to Thai teas, his impact on Thailand's tea industry will be significant. E