



THE SCENT of sandalwood is believed to delight and beckon the gods.

As early as the 1st century A.D., Chinese merchants had braved perilous seas, sailing to Timor to acquire the precious wood from which to make incense, perfumes and items of luxury.

They were followed by Indian traders who brought with them horses from Arabia with which they bartered with the local lords.

Chinese documents from 1436 described Timor as “a region of mountainous terrain covered in sandalwood trees and the country produces nothing else.”

The lure of sandalwood drew Portuguese colonisers. The first Portuguese who arrived in Timor, Duarte Barbosa, wrote in 1598 that “white sandalwood on the island is very abundant and the Moors in India and Persia attach a very high value to it with many benefiting from the sandalwood trees.”

Subsequent centuries of over-exploitation all but decimated those fragrant forests, shoving the species to the brink of extinction. Quality sandalwood is now rare and dear all over the world, with many species of the trees endangered and protected by legislation.

When the sandalwood petered out, the Portuguese introduced maize into Timor as a food crop, and coffee as a cash crop. This legacy has endured. Maize is grown by 60 per cent of Timorese families, and coffee remains Timor-Leste's most important cash crop, today accounting for 80 per cent of non-oil exports and employing a quarter of the country's population.

### Coffee

East Timor coffee is very special, and Starbucks is well aware of it: the global coffee behemoth purchases a substantial portion of the nation's annual crop for its Arabian Mocha Timor blend.

Even though Timor-Leste generates less than 1 per cent of the worldwide production of coffee, it is the largest single-source producer of organic coffee in the world.

The Timor Hybrid is a natural cross between the Robusta and Arabica coffee varieties — an act of nature which occurred without human intervention.

This fortuitous occurrence produced a natural hybrid highly resistant to disease, with a flavour variously described as full, rich liqueur, smooth, sweet and cocoa-toned with a delicate finish.

Organic and Fair Trade certifications allow East Timor coffee to command a premium on the international market.

### Organic produce

Timor-Leste's potential for organic farming is great. Much of the nation's land remains untainted by pesticides and chemical fertilisers, presenting an opportunity for the country to brand its produce as organic, and steering its agricultural products into that premium, niche market.

The government recognises in its 2011-2030 Strategic Development Plan, however, that practicality would demand a two-track approach to the country's agricultural development: applying technology and modern practices to elicit higher yields in a shorter timeframe to meet domestic food needs and to produce commercial quantities of export crops, while preserving and enriching designated areas for organic farming.



**Agriculture and tourism are two pillars which will free Timor-Leste from dependency on oil and gas. We are fully focused on developing these important economic sectors.**

— Mr Agio Pereira, Minister of State and of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers

### Food security and income

The government's objectives in the agriculture sector are twofold: food security, and income generation for the people.

“Timor-Leste has a tradition of agriculture. Eighty per cent of our population engage in some form of farming, many at a subsistence level for a simple rural lifestyle,” explains Agriculture & Fisheries Minister Mariano Assanami Sabino.

“Our goal is to develop the agricultural infrastructure of the country and train and help the people — especially the younger generation — to engage in farming in a modern and professional manner so that they can enjoy the rewards.”

This means enhancing productivity, quality and sustainability, and building capacity in the post-harvest processes of packaging, transportation and shipment, marketing and distribution. “We are delving into all these areas and we welcome international partners and investors,” says Mr Assanami.

Infrastructure development is underway. The government is rehabilitating, upgrading and building roads, ports and airports. Power, water and sanitation are being put in place to underpin the development of the sector.

Relevant ministries are undertaking broad surveys to test the suitability of the soil for agricultural zoning, and to clarify land titles. Irrigation systems are being planned and installed, with water dams being put through trials.

## AGRICULTURE & FISHERIES

# A bountiful land

For centuries, traders have been flocking to Timor for its valuable commodities



Rice paddies of Mt. Legumau Lautem. Agriculture & Fisheries Minister Assanami is declaring 2015 Agriculture Year.



Left: From 'Mystery of the Sea' series from the Atlas of Sir Robert Dudley, 1646. For centuries, traders from Asia and Europe have been drawn to Timor for the island's sandalwood and commodities. Above: Timorese farmers harvesting ripe coffee cherries. PHOTOS: WWW.SANDERUSMAPS.COM, DANIEL J. GROSHONG / HUMMINGBIRD.ORG

And researchers are analysing seeds to identify strains which will thrive in the conditions of Timor-Leste, and which will be most commercially compelling.

### Cash crops

Rice is the staple food of the Timorese. The grain currently accounts for 77 per cent of the country's agricultural output.

Still, it is not enough to meet domestic demand. Timor-Leste imports large amounts of rice from Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, but improved rice varieties and cultivation methods are putting the country on track to self-sufficiency in rice production by 2020.

While the government prioritises food and nutrition security, attention is also being fixed on horticulture and forestry for jobs and income.

Crops such as candlenut and coconut and their derivative products; fruits, spices and cut flowers are all being studied and tested. The aim is to extend the matrix of the sector beyond what may come out of the earth, to include value-added processes and products: roasted cashews, mango pulp, guava jam, passion fruit concentrate, etc. “We are steadfast on providing financial and technical support to develop this crucial sector,” says Mr Assanami.

### Fisheries and aquaculture

Having scratched the surface of the land, an ocean of possibilities lie at sea. Timor-Leste is a half island with 735km of coastline, and 72,000 sq km of Exclusive Economic Zone rich in marine bounty.

The full potential of these aquatic assets have yet to be tapped. Tuna is being harvested in Timor-Leste waters by licensed Chinese and Korean companies, but illegal fishing by others do occur.

There are tremendous prospects for developing offshore fisheries as well as near-shore aquaculture of seaweed, prawn, abalone, and oyster and pearl farming.

The Timor-Leste Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries has undertaken a joint study with WorldFish, an international aquaculture research centre based in Malaysia, on farming tilapia and crab in brackish waters.

### Livestock

The planned development of the South Coast of the country will unleash new opportunities for livestock farming and cattle feed production, which would open up entire new value chains and transform Timor-Leste's economy.

But even before the South Coast kicks in, the Ministry is establishing a programme to double cat-

tle exports to 5,000 heads per year.

Plans are being drafted for a modern abattoir to provide quality cuts, packaging and storage facilities, with food safety certification to attract premium pricing.

“About 80 per cent of Timorese households rear livestock: goats, sheep, pigs, chicken, and some own buffaloes and horses.

A livestock industry can significantly increase the protein intake of the population by providing access to fresh meat and dairy products, as well as create jobs,” says Mr Assanami, who is declaring 2015 Agriculture Year, where government spending on boosting the sector is set to jump.

There is no doubt agriculture and fisheries are the natural backbone of Timor-Leste's economy, and there is no turning back from this necessary advance.

Investors have begun to nibble at the sector, and the country is opening its arms to international partners. In the age of globalisation, all is about efficiencies, pragmatism, branding.

Still, a soft redolence hangs in the air... a lingering memory, a history, a hope. Timor-Leste is rehabilitating sandalwood forestry, reconnecting to its roots, reaching for the future and the intoxicating scent of how its story began.