A young farmer on a herbs and spices farm. Photo Credit: Marion Wagaki.

Tea firms need herbs to whet consumer taste buds, but where are the farmers?

By Marion Wagaki

WITH consumer tastes and preferences changing, Kenyan tea packaging companies are increasingly blending the beverage with herbs and spices to capture and retain a share of domestic and export markets.

Kenya Tea Packers (KETEPA), which enjoys 36 per cent of the local tea value addition market share, blends its black teas with natural herbs such as lemon grass and hibiscus that are popular with many consumers for their health benefits

"The way our mothers used to drink tea is not the same way tea is drunk today.

We have an emerging young population which is insisting on taking their teas with aroma and have their preferences at a different level and therefore we have to keep evolving," said John Ngatia, the Head of Production at the Kericho-based KETEPA.

"We have now invested in herbal teas and therefore we are able to expertly blend the natural herbs and present very natural products in the name of the herbal infusions to our customers."

Ngatia said that they were initially sourcing herbs locally, but feedback from their consumers about quality have recently prompted them to bring in some of the herbs from outside the country.

The company now imports herbs from Nigeria, Turkey, Morocco and Tanzania and only very selectively source some from the local farmers.

"Local farmers do not produce enough herbs of the right quality hence prompting us to source for the aromatic plants from countries outside the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) region. When using the herbs, one has to be careful as global tea markets are sensitive in terms of food safety," said Ngatia.

Ngatia added that KETEPA was in discussions with a big US supermarket chain, which has more than 11,000 stores, to help it secure a foothold in the market.

A herbs farm.
Photo Credit: Marion Wagaki.

The company, which is 83 percent owned by the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA) and by extension by about 650,000 farmers, is only one of the more than 200 tea packers licensed by the government.

Value addition of local tea is minimal, with the bulk of the produce being exported to various destinations in the world. Kenya is the leading exporter of black cut tea and curl (CTC) teas in the world and although highly regarded in terms of quality only seven percent is consumed locally.

The government is encouraging tea producers to add value to at least 40 percent of their total produce so that they can get more earnings.

James Marete, Kenya Tea Board (KTB) assistant director, technical and advisory services said there is an opportunity for the local farmers to produce the herbs for value addition of teas, diversify their earnings and make tea business more sustainable.

“Instead of the local tea packers importing the herbs, they can buy them from the tea farmers around,” Marete said during a recent media tour of the KETEPA factory.

The Agriculture and Food Authority (AFA), he said, has specialists stationed at the Horticultural Crops Directorate (HCD) who can advise farmers on the quality herbs the tea packers require.

“We have heard from KETEPA that they import because the quality of the herbs they get locally are of inferior value or characteristics. We can have the producing companies partnering with other departments in the Ministry of Agriculture to train tea growers and also the youth on how to produce better herbs than the ones that are imported from outside the country,” Marete said.

“There is a huge opportunity for local farmers to produce the required herbs that will give pungency and strength as preferred by consumers.

At the same time, they will not only earn more income but also help us as a factory to cut on the cost of production.”

Ruth Munyoro, an agronomist, notes that herb production is a simple but lucrative venture that farmers could engage in as long as they are aware of the ecological zones they are in before planting the herbs.

Various types of teas made from infused herbs. Photo Credit: Marion Wagaki.