



Steve Lorch, CEO of Table Rock Tea Company, has a long-term vision for making tea production popular in the Upstate.
PHOTOS BY LAUREN PETRACCA/GREENVILLE NEWS

Table Rock Tea Company hopes to make the area famous for its locally grown tea, and to make Upstate known as

TEA COUNTRY



Ron Barnett

Columnist
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - S.C.

Steve Lorch has already established a mission that provides fresh water to more than 100,000 people in 33 countries, written a movie script and created a national brand gourmet soap company.

So when he says he's going to turn the Upstate into "tea country," you'd better take him seriously.

Lorch and his wife, Jennifer, are the owners of the Table Rock Tea Company. And while it might look like only a few scraggly bushes and a basement filled with packing equipment now, I'm betting that this is going to be the start of something big.



Lorch holds a tea plant seedling. It takes about five months for seeds to germinate, and 10 years to have a fully producing, mature tea plant.

Lorch, 47, is in this for the long haul.

Tea plants, after all, live for centuries. And it takes 10 years to get a tea plantation up and running. So when he talks about his dream for the future, he's looking ahead decades.

"Our goal is to make the Upstate known as tea country in 30 years," he said, scanning the horizon to an area where he envisions building a visitors center and cafe.

He's not talking about his company making Upstate tea famous by itself. A few months ago, he established the Table Rock Tea Consortium, which includes eight fledgling tea growers within an hour of here. Twice that many more are signed up to start next year.

I didn't even know tea would grow in these parts before I heard about the Table Rock Tea Company. I've been to the tea plantation in Charleston, but I figured it gets too cold up here for a crop that we've been importing for centuries from places like India.

After all, why did the Sons of Liberty toss a load of tea into Boston Harbor to protest high taxes on the stuff if it would grow here in the colonies?

Tea does generally survive the winters here, but this past winter was a severe test – the most severe in 100 years, according to the weather man. That six-day stretch of solid freezing temperatures killed about 5,000 young tea plants at the Table Rock plantation. And the older ones that survived got set back quite a bit.

"It was a devastating loss," Lorch said. "This will go in our record books in the annals of the tea company."

Tea is also very susceptible to sunburn, so harsh weather on either extreme makes growing *Camellia sinensis*, otherwise known as tea, a challenge here.

But the challenges Upstate South Carolina provides the tea plant are what make it special, according to Lorch.

"Tea is like wine, so it derives its flavor from the environment," he said. "When tea suffers, the flavor becomes more complex."

Steve, who looks just like the cartoon character on his logo, with a floppy tan hat, scruffy whiskers and glasses, bought this 17-acre tract just across Scenic Highway II from Table Rock State Park, 10 years ago. He and his wife were living in Mauldin at the time.

Steve grew up in Philadelphia and came to South Carolina in 1997 to work at Shriners' Hospital.

Did I mention he's also a registered surgical nurse? And that he has invented several pediatric orthopedic instruments? Yep.

He also invented some of the equipment used by the fresh water mission.

He and Jennifer had gotten the bug for growing tea during their previous career as founders of Hydromissions International. They were working on a project in Kenya where there was a tea field, and they fell in love with the idea.

So after nine years of traveling the world with Hydromissions, they handed it off to others. Steve took a job at Cannon Memorial Hospital in Pickens, and soon, he and his wife started planting tea plants on their Table Rock property.

They built a house above a tea packaging facility. That was four years ago.

"We're going to be dead and gone, and this tea company will be here long after we're here. These plants are going to live for hundreds of years. We want to leave something behind. We want people to have buy-in and feel like it's part of them."

Steve Lorch

Co-owner of Table Rock Tea Company

"So, this is kind of our first year that we're really expanding, putting a lot of plants in the field," Steve said.

Right now they have only an acre under cultivation, but they hope to have 10 acres of plants soon.

Since it takes 10 years to have fully producing, mature tea plants, they haven't had enough product yet to keep the company going, so they supplement their own tea by packaging and selling various teas from other sources.

When I was there, he brewed a nice pot of Marathon, which he said is very similar to what they produce in Pickens. It was tasty!

The Lorches have a greenhouse with about 12,000 plants and room for about 5,500 more. It takes about

five months for tea seeds to germinate. I admire Steve's patience. Like I said, he takes the long view.

"We're going to be dead and gone, and this tea company will be here long after we're here," Steve said. "These plants are going to live for hundreds of years. We want to leave something behind. We want people to have buy-in and feel like it's part of them."

They're already on the agritourism map. They even have a small campsite on the property, which they rent online.

Steve acts as the CEO for the company, while Jennifer is the CFO, keeping the money straight.

There's still more about Steve that I haven't told you.

He's a guitar player and songwriter and has recorded seven albums of original Christian music in a studio he operated for 18 years.

Then there's that movie script he wrote. He's under a nondisclosure agreement so he couldn't give details, but it's about the life of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who famously threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow down to his idol, according to the Bible.

Filming is scheduled to start next year.

I don't know what else I might have learned about this amazing guy if I had stayed around longer, but I had to head back to civilization.

It's good to know, though, that such a place exists, and that tea, my favorite drink, is at the heart of it.

And if I can muster up a small fraction of the patience he has, I will enjoy watching Upstate South Carolina turn into Tea Country.

Contact Ron Barnett at rbarnett@gannett.com.