

BEST PRACTICES

“Seed production and organic cultivation of Mt Olympus tea, followed by innovative processing and packaging methods, in a vertical production unit, right under Mt Olympus”

Institutional information

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Name of institution: *OLYMBIOTEA / Aromatic-Medicinal plants & herbs*

Region and Country where the case study took place: *Greece, Region of Central Macedonia,*

Prefecture/Regional Unit of Pieria, Municipal Community of Litochoro

Website: <http://www.olymbiotea.gr/>

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Summary

Explain your case in one or two sentences

OLYMBIOTEA / Aromatic-Medicinal plants & herbs is a sole proprietorship of rural character and a vertical production unit, which was established in 2008 and located in the Municipal Community of Litochoro (Pieria, Greece). The business deals with the seed production, the organic tea cultivation in a privately owned area of about 1,3 ha consisted of several fields which are spread in different places of Litochoro's rural area, the harvesting, the drying, the processing, the packaging and finally the selling, both in the retail sale and the wholesale of the famous special tea variety "Mt Olympus Tea – Sideritis Scardica", in quantities reaching 600-800 kgr/year, mainly in countries abroad.

In fact, this business is a productive and a processive cottage industry unit, which is allowed to operate inside the settlement of Litochoro, as it is considered to be a kind of craft with low perturbation and disturbance. All the above are taking place in the family's old grocery, which meets all the health and food hygiene requirements and standards, of the relevant legislation.

Background information: How was the situation previous to your actions?

In the past and before the installation of the tea cultivation, the fields of Litochoro were being cultivated mainly with arboriculture and tobacco. Mrs. Fysikopoulou didn't have the chance to just continue a previously prepared situation, regarding the tea cultivation, therefore she became a new farmer and she had to seek any available information, to read an extensive bibliography and course to attend seminars and workshops, at her own expenses, in order to install a successful and innovative tea cultivation. The only contact that she used to have with the tea cultivation, was

the 0,15 ha of tea crop, that her mother-in-law had installed, in order to sell the produced tea in family's old grocery, and despite the big demand of the product the offer was not corresponding. But, it was this individual and simple small tea crop that turned out to be the springboard of Mrs. Fysikopoulou's deal with organic tea cultivation professionally, as her mother-in-law provided her with 700 roots of tea planting material, which constituted the base of her seedbed and her future seed production.

Finally, the other major problems that Mrs. Fysikopoulou was obliged to overcome, were:

- The extremely limited knowledge and know-how, concerning the tea cultivation, not only in the region of Litochoro but all over Pieria County. It is very characteristic the fact that, until 2008, there were only 0,6 ha of tea crops in Litochoro and 1,5 ha in all Pieria County*
- There wasn't any help and guidance, even from the National Agencies, because of the little interest about this cultivation*
- The fact that the applied know-how in the cultivation of tea crops, was coming from the tobacco crop experience, and was not suitable in all the cases.*

What were the needs you identified?

The needs that Mrs. Fysikopoulou spotted, and were necessary to be done, had mainly to do both with the searching of available and suitable for tea cultivation arable land and the type of the farming, as well. Mrs. Fysikopoulou noted that farming with chemicals is not the proper way to cultivate the tea and/or other medicinal or aromatic plants, due to the fact that all of their aromatic and/or healing properties are derived directly from the nature land, in addition to the caused environmental damage.

Another need that was identified was the change, the differentiation and/or the improvement of the cultivation techniques and practices that used until then and the determination of tea varieties that would be used in the future.

Mrs. Fysikopoulou also noticed that she should oriented her efforts towards the processing and the packaging of the produced product, in order to make it more attractive to the market, but mainly to participate and to get benefit from National and EU Programmes and Projects as a small craft unit, or to get granted as a member of Commercial Chamber, and in that way become absolutely sustainable.

Finally, Mrs. Fysikopoulou saw that the domestic sales network was rather limited, so she should definitely turn to the external market and export procedures. The need to increase in first and then to stabilize the tea production, create the idea of making her own seedbed.

These changes raised other needs such as:

- more demanding tasks of work, especially referring to quality*
- acquiring the know-how and gaining expertise about the new type of crop*
- increase of the production to cover the demand without decreasing the product quality*
- extension of the cultivated land*
- Innovative management practices to expand the scope of the work and the clientele as well.*

What solution you found to cover those needs?

First of all, Mrs. Fysikopoulou decided to gradually enlarge the arable land, firstly from 0,2 ha to 0,7 ha (2012) and then from 0,7 ha to 1,3 ha (2015), as it is until today, in order to reach an acceptable, adequate and constant volume of production, as it definitely needed for the exports. Secondly, with a view to achieve a high and constant quality of the tea produced and to protect her crop from diseases and illnesses, given the fact that there wasn't enough knowledge and expertising for this cultivation, even from agencies or institutes in the region of Pieria, she started to attend seminars on tea cultivation (planting, watering, weed controlling and harvesting), on tea drying methods and especially on tea processing and tea packaging methods, in order to get differentiated from the typical procedures and to gain experiences and more knowledge in modern practices.

Mrs. Fysikopoulou also started the product's certification procedures, trying to give to her product a quality ID and to standardize the production processes, thinking that a certified product, especially with a Protected Designation of Origin from a very famous mountain (Mt Olympus) as a brand name, would be very competitive to the markets and would protect her innovative cultivation practices from copyright infringements.

Finally, Mrs. Fysikopoulou, decided that she should immediately started to promote her products and her methods of production, so that before even her tea crops be harvested, she would be already able to dispose her products to the market, and gradually gaining the financial autonomy of her business.

What actions did you take to reach the solution?

The main actions and measures that Mrs. Fysikopoulou, took, in order to manage his exploitation in a proper, modern, profitable and, above all, a sustainable way, were:

- *She managed to acquire more arable land, either with purchase or with granting, in order to manage tea crops in different stages of growing, so she could produce, process and sell her products throughout the whole of the year, which is necessary when entering the export market.*
- *She introduced and adopted new and innovative agricultural practices, by using more sparse plantings of the planting material (0,40 X 0,80 m) and a very specific cultivation machine for aromatic and medicinal plants, with the aim of removing the weeds, without implementing pesticides, herbicides or other chemical preparation. At the same time she started to use more often watering with hoses instead of fertilization of the crop.*
- *She also began to dry the tea in the field, in a physical manner, without using nylon and make the first sorting right after the harvest and before the produced products been transferred to the remaking unit, in order to reduce the labour costs.*
- *She created her own seedbed and she managed to carry out seed production for planting, by selecting the excellent phenotypes from the first 700 plants and maintaining them as maternal seeders, improving in this way her tea crops genetically, year by year.*
- *She introduced innovative patents (for which she didn't want to reveal any details) for the harvesting, for the drying of the plants without using the space-demanding drying beds and for the cutting of the plants as well, in order to get ready for processing, packaging and selling. All these patents were very useful and in fact they secured the business financial sustainability, as*

only by their implementation Mrs. Fysikopoulou was able to manage the quantity (600 kgr/year) of the produced tea, on her own.

- *Based on the knowledge she gained of attending the training seminars, she transacted a lot of experiments especially on tea cultivation and on tea drying, which results helped Mrs. Fysikopoulou to automate her work.*
- *She gradually oriented his efforts towards the direction of processing and packaging the produced tea, launching frontier forms of packaging, such as tea-bags and tea-spoons, which were her ideas.*
- *She determined that the one and only tea variety that she would deal with, was Mt Olympus Tea "Sideritis scardica"*
- *Last but not least, she started to disseminate the new status and the additional services of her business, by making labels, by social media networking (e.g. google, facebook), by participating in national (mainly) and international agriculture exhibitions, by co-operating with travel agents, by advertising and spreading information brochures and newsletters in hotels, restaurants and other tourist enterprises etc.*

If any, which partners or other organizations did you involve during the process?

- 1) *Institute of Control of Organic Products - BIOHELLAS L.P.*
- 2) *Directorate of Agriculture (Department of Licenses Granting, Industry, Energy, Natural Resources and Professions) - Regional Unit of Pieria*
- 3) *Commercial Chamber of Pieria*
- 4) *Region of Central Macedonia*

What were the main problems or difficulties you had to face?

- 1) *The main problem was that there wasn't enough arable land available, so Mrs. Fysikopoulou unit didn't manage to grow, as the initial indications were showing.*
- 2) *There wasn't any expertise in tea cultivation in Pieria County, so Mrs. Fysikopoulou, had to spend a lot of money and working hours, in order to gain this knowledge and the procedures know-how*
- 3) *There wasn't enough fund, therefore Mrs. Fysikopoulou, made a lot of efforts to be included and get benefit from co-funded EU and national programmes, but during all these years, there wasn't such perspectives for this particular cultivation (neither funding nor relevant projects for the tea crops).*
- 4) *Bureaucracy in all the approving and licensing procedures*
- 5) *Small demand of the product in the domestic market, so Mrs. Fysikopoulou redirected her sales plan in the foreign market.*
- 6) *A lot of money and time spent, in order to promote and marketing the products, especially in the exporting procedures*
- 7) *Serious difficulties of the unit expansion, because of the rough tax treatment of the tea processing unit, from the national authorities.*

What is the situation now, after your actions?

Today, OLYMBIOTEA / Aromatic-Medicinal plants & herbs, despite its innovative operation which was described in detail in previous paragraphs, is struggling to maintain itself in a sustainable condition, due to high taxation and expensive export duties. Mrs. Fysikopoulou hasn't managed to certify her product as Mt Olympus Tea, yet, and therefore a lot of tea growers showed up, claiming that they cultivate tea of Mt Olympus, although they don't do organic farming and of course they don't use Mrs. Fysikopoulou's, cultivation, harvesting, drying, sorting, processing and packaging practices

Besides this, Mrs. Fysikopoulou is still facing great difficulties on finding new arable land, which is necessary, in order to implement her land switching plan, which ensures the constant and gradually increasing production.

Main lessons learned along the way?*

- 1) *Patience*
- 2) *Direct contact and access to nature*
- 3) *Faith in her abilities, despite the big difficulties*
- 4) *Life quality*
- 5) *Tea and its medicinal properties has become a life-choice and a life style*

Annex:

Max 3 Images

Other related resources

Photographic Documentation



Photo 1: View of one out of five tea grows of Mrs. Fysikopoulou, located in Litochoro Pieria



Photo 2: This photo shows the sparse planting of tea plants in planting links of $0,40 \times 0,80$ m



Photo 3: Mrs. Fysikopoulou tea products Participating in international exhibitions



Photo 4: The innovative packaging of tea-spoon