

The £500,000 Tea Fraud That Deceived Britain's Luxury Market

In a case that has sent ripples through the UK's premium food and drink industry, a fraudster who sold foreign-imported tea as authentic Scottish produce has been jailed for three and a half years. Thomas Robinson, who operated under the name The Wee Tea Plantation, misled luxury clients including the Balmoral Hotel, the Dorchester, and representatives for Fortnum & Mason into purchasing what they believed was Scottish-grown tea cultivated on a Perthshire estate.

Robinson's deception was both elaborate and sustained. Between 2014 and 2019, he claimed to use innovative horticultural methods to grow tea in Scotland's challenging climate, while in reality, he had imported over a tonne of tea from overseas suppliers, repackaging it and passing it off as locally produced. A kilo of this imported tea, sourced cheaply from Africa, was sold at up to 100 times its original value.

To bolster his credibility, Robinson fabricated an impressive resume, falsely claiming academic honours, military service in bomb disposal, and even involvement with the Obama administration. He also sold over 22,000 tea plants to Scottish and Jersey-based growers at £12.50 each, while secretly sourcing them from Italy for just €3 per plant. Many buyers believed they were investing in locally cultivated stock.

Appearing in court via videolink, Robinson represented himself and expressed remorse, citing guilt, reputational damage to the emerging Scottish tea industry, and emotional distress. However, Sheriff Keith O'Mahony rejected his plea for leniency, stating that Robinson's actions demonstrated clear planning, persistence, and a pattern of deception that spanned several years and caused significant harm.

The conviction has been welcomed by regulatory authorities. Helen Nisbet, procurator fiscal for Tayside, Central and Fife, noted the financial and reputational impact Robinson's actions had on individuals and legitimate businesses. Food Standards Scotland echoed that sentiment, calling the case a stark reminder that food fraud is a serious crime with tangible consequences.

"This case sends a strong message to anyone considering food-related fraud," said Ron McNaughton of Food Standards Scotland. "Misleading consumers and businesses not only undermines trust, it directly threatens the integrity of Scotland's globally respected food and drink sector."