



Harrison (left) with Kaiser, inspecting white tea growth in Fujian, China

supplier profile

Rishi Tea



Rishi Tea believes only the finest quality leaves, direct from local artisans, deliver a 'true tea experience'. We talk to co-owner Benjamin Harrison

Q What is the philosophy behind Rishi Tea?

A Rishi is a Sanskrit word that translates as 'sage' or 'pioneer', and our mission is to elevate what the true tea experience is. We work with farmers and artisans to pick the finest quality, freshest organic tea direct from the source, and in a socially conscious manner. We believe all these qualities are fundamental to creating a true tea experience.

Q How and where do you source your teas and ingredients?

A Joshua Kaiser, Rishi's founder, is our primary tea expert and buyer. He travels across Asia sourcing new teas and herbs from local producers. The re-

lationships we have at origin have been fostered by Joshua for a decade, and with each season they evolve and improve. Unlike other tea importers, who depend on middlemen, Joshua has developed close relationships with the tea makers, many of whom are not just farmers but also calligraphers, tea historians, antique collectors and even university professors. They are a constant source of inspiration and challenge us to learn more about tea.

Rishi works with over 120 gardens in China, Japan, Taiwan and other Asian countries. In each country, we have also formed partnerships with farmers, artisans, scientists, researchers and other tea professionals, some of whom often travel with us to help source new teas.

Q Can you give some examples of the company's socially responsible approach to doing business?

A Small tea farms operated by 'tea families', which rely on their artisan trade to make a living, are now having a very hard time competing with larger, conventional tea projects – many of which produce huge quantities of inferior, imitation 'famous' teas at cheap prices. This devalues the market for the tea families, many of whom cannot survive by producing only a couple hundred kilos of premium tea for sporadic, small buyers.

Due to these challenges, as well as urbanisation in China and the glut of inferior teas on the global market, many tea families are finding new trades. Some argue that traditional teas are becoming extinct. While this is not altogether true, tea artisans certainly have the economic odds stacked against them.

BACKGROUND BRIEFING

Rishi Tea was founded in 1997 by college graduate Joshua Kaiser, with the help of his high school friends Aaron Kapp and Benjamin Harrison.

Growing up in Milwaukee in the US, Kaiser had always been interested in international culture, food and botanics. After completing a degree in political science and international relations at Edgewood College in Madison, he embarked on a global adventure, spending extensive time in Asia, where he developed a passion for the continent and its ancient art of tea-making.

Returning to the US, he came to the conclusion that there was a shortage of good tea imported from Asia. Together with Kapp and Harrison he set up Rishi Tea to rectify this, choosing to bypass importers and source fresh, quality produce direct from organic

tea gardens across the continent, from Japan, China, India and Sri Lanka to Vietnam and Thailand.

The Milwaukee business has come a long way from its humble beginnings in a 500sq ft (46sq m) building with no windows. In 2003, it moved to a new 15,000sq ft (1,394sq m) warehouse, which has since expanded to 35,000sq ft (3,252sq m). The company has grown around 50 per cent a year since 2003.

While Kapp resigned from Rishi Tea in early 2007 to pursue other entrepreneurial goals, Kaiser and Harrison, both 34, are still fully involved. As CEO and president, Kaiser spends the majority of time travelling in Asia sourcing teas and forging relationships with tea artisans, while Harrison, as managing partner, is in charge of sales, internal operations, supporting managers and long-term business development.

Rishi works with 120 small tea farms in countries across Asia (below)





A tea picker from Yunnan, China, showing diao lan or 'singers herb' that's used to soothe sore throats and colds



Rishi's direct purchasing allows them to realise greater earnings – about a third of our overall product offering is Fair Trade certified. On top of this we have set up more than 100 projects with tea families. Along with our partners in each country, we teach farmers how to create certified organic teas to be sold on to larger natural food markets. This is done on a sustainable basis and supports more than 3,000 workers on a dependable wage. Most importantly, it provides a new way for the families to refresh and preserve the production of rare artisan teas.

Q What criteria do you look for when sourcing new teas?

A The criteria we look for varies from region to region and from variety to variety. However, there are various set stages of evaluation. Firstly, we judge the tea in its dry leaf form; we generally look

Rishi currently produces more than 120 single-origin and blended teas

for a good, consistent leaf shape, a complex flavour and a pronounced, lasting aroma, free of any defects.

Next we test the infused water. All good quality tea should have clarity, brightness and, in some cases, a shimmer. Old, poorly stored, or poor quality tea will often look dull. Lastly, we study the wet tea leaves following infusion for consistency of shape and colour.

Over and above this, we test the tea for its flavour, aroma, after-taste, strength, density and colour.

Q What quality control methods do you have in place?

A We have strict controls at all stages, from harvesting and production to

FAVOURITES

BENJAMIN HARRISON

Book: *A Farewell to Arms* (or just about anything by Hemmingway)

Film: *Miller's Crossing* and

Raising Arizona

Place: At home with my family

Food: Sushi

Leisure activity: Hiking

Season: Autumn

Spa: In Vivo, Milwaukee

Spa treatment: Swedish massage (though acupuncture may soon be my new favourite!)

packing and final shipping. Each tea is individually judged at origin every season, based on the criteria just outlined. This is done by Joshua, along with our partners in various countries and other members of Rishi Tea staff.

Working at origin is fundamental to quality control as we can evaluate the tea even before it's finished and adjust processing so the tea is made to our spec. We taste the tea again in the US for final

approval; water quality varies widely in China whereas in the US we can use consistent water. Tea will only be as good as your water; it's best to use either bottled, spring or filtered water, and not distilled.

Q What processing and blending techniques do you use?

A Most of the teas are picked manually and hand crafted according to age-old artisan methods, but processing also meets good, modern manufacturing practices. About 75 per cent of Rishi Teas are single garden varieties, which means they're unblended and from just one origin. The other 25 per cent of our products consist of tea herb blends and caffeine-free botanical blends. The latter are commonly referred to as 'herbal teas', though they don't contain any real tea. Any blended Rishi product is our own recipe, made of individually sourced ingredients and is mixed in-house, by hand.

Q What makes Rishi Teas worthy of being called 'organic'?

A Any tea listed on our website as 'organic' meets standards set by the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) National Organic Program. Rishi was one of the first tea companies in the US to achieve such certification.

We are inspected and certified by US company Quality Assurance International and in China we have entered into a production partnership with a certified organic producer of natural foods and teas. Through this relationship we have developed many organic quality control protocols. In addition, at least half of all our teas – and all our single-origin teas – are compliant with European Union guidelines for organics.

Women of China's Dai ethnic minority pick pu-reh, black and green tea leaves (above); white tea spring harvest in Fujian, China (below)



RISHI TEA BY NUMBERS

- Wholesale sales make up 90 per cent of business, with online sales making up the rest
- It supplies around 24 spas, constituting "a small but significant part" of its wholesale business
- The company has 35 full-time employees
- Its three most popular teas are Organic Jasmine Peal, Organic Earl Gray and Organic Blueberry Rooibos.



Q Can you name some of the different products that Rishi Tea offers?

A We currently offer more than 125 selections of single-origin and blended teas from China, Taiwan, Japan, India, Sri Lanka and beyond. In 2000, 2001 and 2002, we won the Best Tea in America award from the Speciality Coffee Association, and in 2006 we won Best Iced Green Tea and Best Black Iced Tea awards at the World Tea Expo.

We also offer a range of teawares and accessories, sourced directly from local tradesmen. Tokoname, for example, is a style of natural glaze pottery developed in the Japanese city of the same name between the 9th and 12th centuries.

WHO'S WHO?

Founder/president/CEO:
Joshua Kaiser
Managing partner/co-owner:
Benjamin Harrison
Wholesale sales manager:
Todd Nixdorff

Q Is there anything particularly exciting that you're working on?

A We're thrilled with our new organic sencha (steamed green tea) from Kogoshima in Japan. It's made from early flush raw material – the most complex in flavour and aroma – and is harvested and processed by two of the most innovative tea artisans in Japan. It is a brilliant emerald green and has a nutty, slightly sweet flavour with a rich mouthfeel.

Q How many spa operators are you currently working with?

A We work with at least 24 spas in the US, as well as wellness centres and acupuncture clinics, and are finalising a rollout with Spatality's international spa brand, Nectar (see SB 08/1 p22)

Q What are your marketing and retail strategies?

A We are an importer and wholesaler first, with a website to help with promotion and retail. Our core wholesale market is speciality food stores.

Q What are Rishi Tea's future goals?

A We'd like to see a rise in the number of spas which care about artisan teas. We'd also like to establish relationships with distributors for the speciality food and high-end hospitality markets so we can develop our international scope. We can ship anywhere in the world, but we're only just getting started internationally. Europe and Asia are particularly intriguing. ●