

# Rishi Tea

## Milwaukee's other brewmasters

BY MARTIN HINTZ



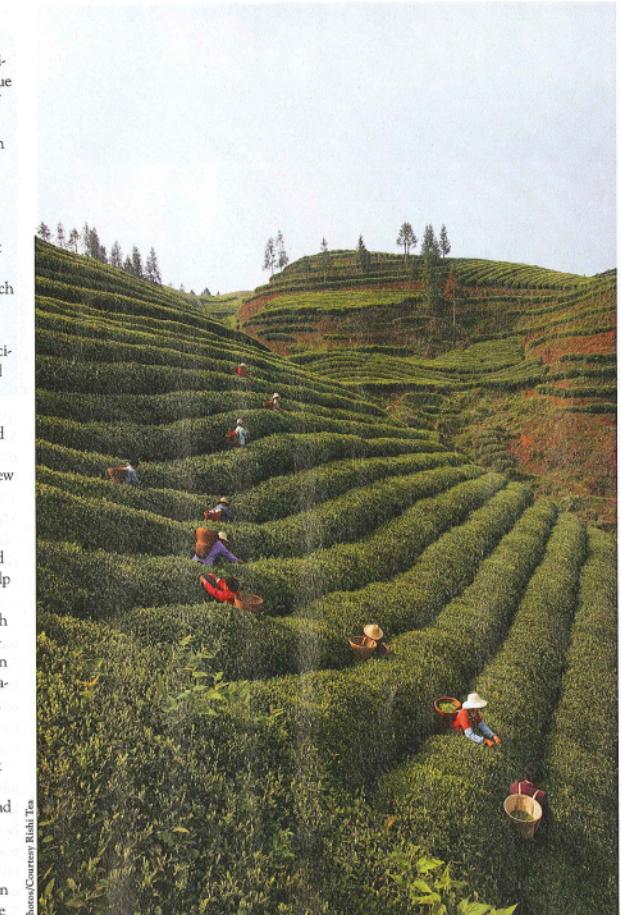
**A**s "the brewing capital of the world," Milwaukee's reputation was built, in part, on fastidious beverage-making. That tradition continues today with one major-league brewery still hanging on and a handful of craft breweries sprawled around town. So when Joshua Kaiser was looking to launch a new brew, he selected his home state, where he knew his customer base would embrace a small learning curve for a big-taste payoff. But there was one unknown: How would people respond to a brew that was leaf, not barley-based?

Kaiser's new brew was artisan tea, which he had become a fan of while traveling in Asia. "When I got back, I saw that the traditional, handcrafted teas that I appreciated overseas were rarely available around here," Kaiser says. He figured that North American consumers would embrace artisan tea, just as they did fine coffee and wines. Being a true Milwaukeean who appreciated value and quality, he also knew the price point needed to be right.

Capitalizing on his Far East contacts, Kaiser launched his own tea import business in 1997. When he realized he needed help stateside, he knew just the guy to help him out: Benjamin Harrison, his former classmate at Milwaukee's Rufus King High School. While Kaiser headed off to Edgewood College in Madison after graduation for studies in political science and international relations, Harrison took up French and history at Maine's Bowdoin College.

By the time Kaiser was looking for a partner, Harrison was living in New York City. With some persuasion, Kaiser convinced his buddy to return to his roots and take a gamble on his tea company. Back in Milwaukee, the pair began building Rishi, a Sanskrit word meaning "sage" or "revealer of the truth." They started out in a 400-square-foot windowless space in the Third Ward. With the help of friends, they hand-blended original botanicals and individually packaged their first premium teas.

Today, with 40 employees and a more



Photos/Courtesy Rishi Tea

Genmai Matcha (opposite) is a Japanese green tea with a distinctive mossy color. In 2005, Rishi Tea and its partners in China established an organic fair trade co-op in Central China's Hubei province, where tea is hand-harvested for Rishi (above).

### Rishi's top 10 tea blends:

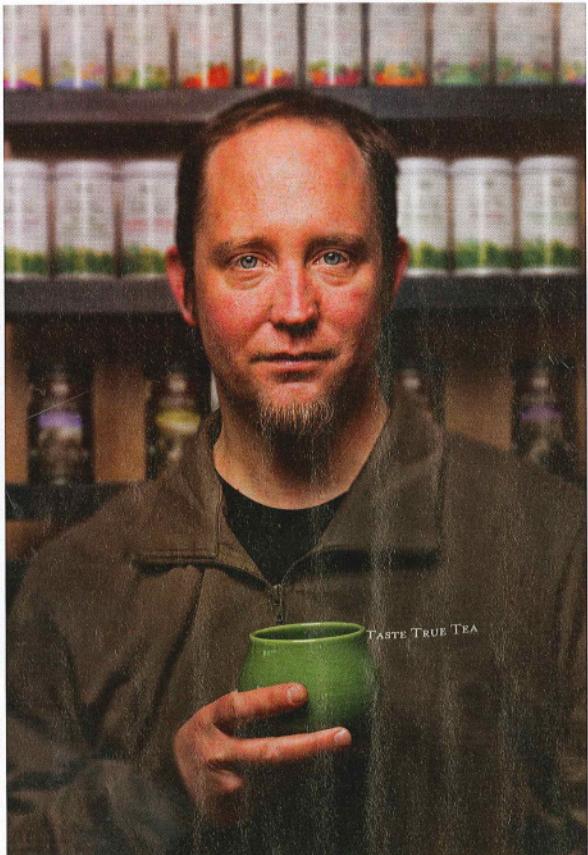
**Bergamot Sage** — The character of sage is balanced and combined with touches of lemon thyme and bergamot, and coupled with overtones of fresh pine, wintergreen and peppermint. It is hailed as a mood-boosting blend.

**Cinnamon Plum** — A 2009 World Tea first-place champion, this caffeine-free herbal blend is rich with currants, hibiscus, hints of plum and accents of cinnamon and sweet licorice root. It can be served hot, iced or brewed as iced tea. Rishi donates 25 percent of the profits from its sale to the Clean Water Fund.

**Earl Grey Organic** — Rishi's best-selling tea blends the bold Yunnan Dian Hong, harvested from ancient tea trees, with natural Bergamot citrus from Southern Italy. Earl Grey is America's most popular tea, and Rishi's organic version was a first-place winner at the 2008 World Tea Championship.

**Iron Goddess of Mercy** — Also called "Tae Guan Yin," this specially baked oolong tea is made-to-order for Rishi Tea each spring and winter. The tea is hand-harvested from the soft stem Wu-Yi tea bush, a descendent of tea bushes introduced to Taiwan from Fujian in the 19th century.

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Benjamin Harrison (above), Rishi co-founder and vice president of sales, was enlisted by friend Joshua Kaiser to join his tea-import business. In 1997, Kaiser (above, center) decided to start importing the hand-crafted tea blends he enjoyed during trips to Asia. In this photo, he inspects leaves in Yunnan province, China. The spring tea harvest in Xuan'en County in China's Hubei province (above, right).

**Jasmine Pearl** – A first-place winner at the 2008 World Tea Championships, this tea's green tea leaves and silvery buds are hand-rolled into small pearls and scented with the essence of fresh jasmine blossoms. The tea is grown in Fujian, a province on China's southeast coast.

**Masala Chai Concentrate** – This blend of fresh spices is slow-brewed with an organic, wild-grown black tea from Yunnan, China. Its Fair Trade ingredients include cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, ginger, dried cane syrup, blackstrap molasses, vanilla extract and lemon juice.

**Matcha** – This Japanese tea powder is 100 percent pure green tea. It was first used by Zen monks hundreds of years ago to maintain alertness during long meditations. Because it is in powder form, it also contains the same amount of antioxidants as three cups of regular green tea.

**Pu-erh Vanilla Mint** – A new Rishi favorite, this full-flavored and balanced blend has a deep reddish-black, opaque infusion with a cool peppermint note. Its lightly sweet flavor has accents of espresso and cacao. Prepare with Mexican chocolate and milk for first-class decadence.

Photo/Courtesy Rishi Tea

Jerry Lauterman

spacious workspace in Bay View in Milwaukee's south side, Rishi is now one of the country's largest importers of organic loose-leaf tea, directly importing nearly 100 tons of tea in 2010 for processing in Milwaukee. "While size is not an indicative of success, we believe it's a great indication that people really love drinking our tea, enjoy working with us and support our mission," Harrison says.

Rishi tea can be found all over the state, including Whole Foods, Milwaukee-area Sendik's grocery stores, Madison's Willy Street Co-op and numerous other large retail outlets, as well as specialty shops, trendy cafés and upscale restaurants. The company also has a strong online presence.

Rishi is very particular with its product; all tea and tea ingredients undergo a scrupulous evaluation process. "They are tasted side-by-side multiple times to determine the best tea and ingredient for each blend," Kaiser says. "We're thorough and precise, which ensures a high quality tea that's well-balanced. That means great nuance and depth."

Customers here and abroad recognize that commitment. Adding to a long string of honors, Rishi Tea won 11 first-place awards at the 2009 World Tea Championship, more than double the awards received by their

closest competitors. It also captured seven first-place awards at the 2010 North American Tea Championship.

Kaiser keeps his bags packed and now spends the majority of his year traveling to source tea, working alongside farmers to harvest and process ingredients. Harrison handles the business side of the operation.

"Rishi Tea continues to surprise," says Harrison, looking back at the growth of the company. "We have had an incredible amount of support in Milwaukee since the start and have been lucky enough to grow through word of mouth, guerrilla marketing and by building long-lasting direct relationships with both our partners at origin and our customers in the States and abroad."

The company prides itself on being one of the few in the specialty-tea industry that works directly with tea producers instead of non-direct trade channels. In further goodwill measure, a portion of the purchase price of Masala Chai now helps anthropologist Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots, her institute's global, environmental and humanitarian youth program.

The company is able to support such causes because of the success it has had, which in part is due to the increasing popularity of tea overall. Harrison has seen

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**Silver Needle** – Officially called "Bai Hao Yin Zhen," this is the premium grade of classic white tea, made from the first spring buds of the tea plant. The leaves are hand-picked from a Fujian varietal that is noted for its large, silvery buds and delicious sweet flavor.

**Super Green** – This Japanese green tea took first place at the 2010 North American Tea Championship. It combines chumushi sencha from Kagoshima and a ceremonial grade matcha from Japan's Kyoto prefecture. It has a vivid green infusion with a smooth and sweet flavor.

#### THE PERFECT CUP

A great cup of tea largely depends on the quality of the tea used, but other elements also affect the taste. Water is important. Rishi's co-founders Joshua Kaiser and Benjamin Harrison recommend using spring or filtered water and cooling the water when necessary. Water just off of a boil is great for botanicals (herbal tea) and most black, oolong and Pu-erh teas, but not good for Japanese green tea, Kaiser warns.



which is recommended with certain chai blends – like Rishi's Chocolate Chai and Vanilla Mint Chai.

When it comes to preparation, Harrison says drinkers-in-the-know want their tea leaves to expand and release a full flavor. He recommends using a brew basket or a natural tea filter instead of a tea ball, which gives off a metallic aftertaste. Another recommendation: spring or filtered water – and don't over steep. "You can have an incredible Japanese green tea but if it's over-steeped, you're not going to want to drink that cup," Kaiser warns.

So which teas do Rishi's owners prefer? Harrison's favorite is organic Sencha, a steamed Japanese green tea, which he drinks for energy. He also appreciates its rich umami, or savory, flavor. Kaiser loves oolong tea and Matcha, a powdered Japanese green tea. They both drink tea daily, whether at home, at Rishi headquarters or hiking through the mountains of Yunnan, China. **WT**

**Martin Hintz**, a confirmed tea drinker who prefers a robust brew, writes regularly about food, chefs and cooking for a number of publications. He lives in Milwaukee County where he and his wife, Pam, have a small farm and sell vegetables and eggs at area farm markets.