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Tea You Can Trust

Rishi Tea taps into the gourmet-food market with a worldly product, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship

by Matt Alderton

Since the beginning of time, man has been searching for a drinkable cure-all. According to Islamic legend, coffee was used to cure a mysterious illness spreading through Yemen around 575 AD. In the 18th century, beer was recommended as a treatment for scurvy. In ancient China, wine—steeped with a whole snake—was thought to cure everything from back pain to the common cold. Even Coca-Cola was first intended as a remedy for headaches and depression.

According to scientists, however, the closest thing to a miracle drink isn't coffee or Coke. It's tea.

Steeped from the leaves of tea plants, tea is the second most consumed beverage in the world behind only water, according to the Tea Association of the USA, which says Americans alone drink over 2.8 billion gallons of tea a year. Chock full of antioxidants, scientists believe tea can help treat or prevent conditions as varied as heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's.

However, Rishi Tea believes tea can cure a lot more than illness. Based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Rishi Tea specializes in organic and fair-trade teas from single origins in Southeast Asia, including China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, and India. Founded in 1997, it's spent the last 14 years turning tea into a social enterprise that builds communities, develops economies, and improves environments. "Our core purpose is transforming lives," COO Todd Wickstrom says. "We really want to be able to make a difference as a company."

Understanding how Rishi Tea makes a difference requires understanding how it makes tea. The company's founder, Joshua Kaiser, spends eight

to nine months a year traveling in Asia, sourcing tea and building relationships with tea growers. "What makes us so unique is we can tell people exactly where their tea came from, since we don't buy from brokers," Wickstrom says. "It allows for complete traceability of our tea supply."

Traceability allows Rishi Tea—whose largest customer is Whole Foods—to tap into the gourmet-food movement. "There's been a whole boom of micro-roasters and micro-breweries and artisan bakers and cheesemakers," Wickstrom says. "Once you've had a taste of real Parmigiano-Reggiano from Italy, you never really go back to the green cardboard can. We think the same thing happens with tea; once people have had tea the way it's supposed to be prepared, it's very difficult to go back to anything they drank before."

Wickstrom describes it as a conversion experience. Not only because of the tea's flavor, but also because of its origin. "Food is a really great way to have a direct connection to what's happening in other parts of the world," he says. "So we've really steered away from market-driven products and focused instead on authentic flavors and tastes from around the world."

CHARITABLE ENDEAVORS

Clean Water Fund: Rishi Tea donates 25% of the profits from its Organic Cinnamon Plum seasonal tea blend to Clean Water Fund, a grassroots organization working to protect and restore America's waters.

Green America: Whenever possible, Rishi Tea's teas are certified Fair Trade. As a member of Green America, it promotes corporate responsibility, educates on green and fair-trade business principles, and helps build sustainable communities in the United States and abroad.

Growing Power: Rishi Tea donates its used and discarded tea leaves for use in composts. The beneficiary is Growing Power, a self-sustaining urban farm that promotes sustainable farming practices in the United States.

Jane Goodall Institute: Every purchase of Rishi Tea's Masala Chai concentrate helps the Jane Goodall Institute, including Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots, a global environmental and humanitarian youth program.

Milwaukee Fair Trade Coalition: Rishi Tea is a member of MFTC, which helped establish Milwaukee as the first Fair Trade City in the United States.

Organic Consumers Association: Rishi Tea is a member of OCA, a nonprofit grassroots organization that promotes the views and interests of organic and socially responsible consumers.

Organic Trade Association: Rishi Tea partners with organic tea gardens around the world to offer high-quality organic tea.

Our Milwaukee: Rishi Tea is a member of Our Milwaukee, a local business alliance dedicated to building a more sustainable Milwaukee.



HIGH STANDARDS: Ms. Qu Ping, a friend of Rishi Tea, shows off the picking standard of first-flush Lu Zhen Green Needles in Xuan En's Ma'an village, Hubei, China.

Still, the market is important. The more tea it sells, the more good Rishi Tea can do. "Carlo Petrini, founder of Slow Food, talks about virtuous globalization," Wickstrom says. "Without the buying power of the United States, in particular, people in other origins would really struggle. Virtuous globalization is about really making a difference in the communities that grow our tea; we see it as our responsibility to not only buy products that are distinctive, but to create a viable marketplace for those products."

The operative word is "viable." Rishi Tea rarely makes "donations for donations' sake," according to Wickstrom. Instead, the company focuses on sustainable long-term community work. Major focuses, for instance, are organic and fair-trade projects. In fact, 60 percent of Rishi Tea's products are Fair Trade Certified. What's more, the company has been USDA Organic Certified since 2002, and in 2009, paid approximately 30 percent of all the fair-trade premiums paid into China for tea, thanks to its ongoing involvement with two Chinese Fair Trade Certified projects that are designed to support economic development in tea farmers' communities.

Meanwhile, Rishi Tea has also collaborated on co-branded products, sharing proceeds with the Clean Water Fund, a grassroots organization working to protect and restore America's waters, and the Jane Goodall Institute, which supports youth service projects benefiting animals, communities, and the environment.

Because importing tea is a high-consumption, high-emissions operation, environmental initia-

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TEAS AROUND THE WORLD: Mr. Nishi-san (left), an organic tea pioneer in Kagoshima, Japan, stands in one of his tea fields with the president of the Japan Tea Exporter's Association, Kotaro Tanimoto-san (right) and Rishi Tea founder Joshua Kaiser (middle).



STRATEGY TO SHARE

KEEP DOORS OPEN

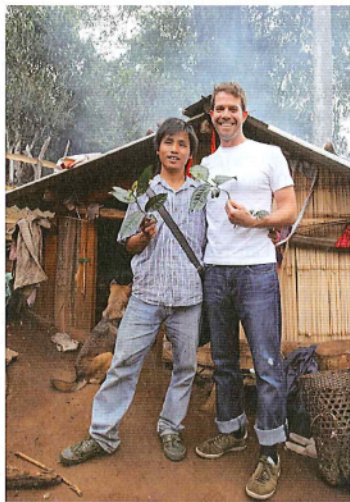
"To be in a fast-growth business like we're in, communication is essential. As companies grow from 2 people to 4 people to 8 people to 16 people, and so on, interpersonal dynamics become exponentially more complicated. So, we do a lot of internal communication. We practice open-book management, for instance, so our entire company knows what the most important priorities are for the year and for the quarter. It helps us keep people focused. It's a culture where everybody believes they have a voice and that their voice will be heard."

—Todd Wickstrom, COO



tives are equally important, says Wickstrom, who notes that Rishi Tea uses biodegradable packing materials; prints packaging for its Organic Iced Tea and Natural Tealeaf Powder products on Forest Stewardship Council-certified paper that's made with 100 percent wind energy and 80 percent post-consumer waste; uses easy-peel labels on its retail tins so they can be recycled and reused; and donates used or defective tea for use in composting.

Although it's no miracle cure, it's nonetheless a remedy, and it's helping Rishi Tea treat the social, economic, and environmental side effects of globalization. Says Wickstrom, "We're always open to opportunities and to helping out where we can—all while keeping a close eye on our profitability, understanding that we're not going to be any good to anybody if we run out of money." [P]



FRESH FROM THE SOURCE:

Joshua Kaiser travels the world to find the best varieties of tea and often examines his findings. In Yunnan, China, he frequents the Mannong Manmai Fair Trade Tea Project (above) where growers sell "Yunnan Da Ye" broad tealeaf varieties, which compose many of Rishi's Pu-erh teas.