



STORY BY NICOLE SWEENEY  
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER O. BLUHM

Joshua Kaiser guzzles roughly 2 gallons of tea a day. So when we met the founder of Milwaukee's Rishi Tea for a beverage at the Milwaukee Public Market and spotted Rishi on the menu board, we figured he'd order the obvious.

Wrong. He opted for a Red Eye instead.

We don't blame him for needing the extra caffeine jolt. He was still coping with jetlag from his most recent trip to Southeast Asia, an occupational hazard for a guy who spends more than half his time scouring the globe for the best organic and artisan teas. He's been to China 10 times this year, along with Thailand, Vietnam and Japan. He's constantly adjusting to an 11- to 13-hour time difference, but he's not complaining.

"I love traveling and experiencing things that are different," said Kaiser, one of Rishi's three owners and the company's president and CEO.

Since Kaiser launched the specialty tea company in 1997, it has taken off at a phenomenal rate.

"People scoff at the fact that one of the best tea companies in America is based in Milwaukee," Kaiser said, "... and I think it's helped us. We're kind of the quiet underdog."

# Joshua KAISER

## Passion for tea takes Rishi founder to faraway places

### bio

**Age** 33

**Family** Married to Shin Ji Lee Kaiser

**Daily tea consumption** Roughly 2 gallons

**Fave tea** Right now, it's "Pu-erh Wang Tea Cake," which he says "yields a rich, almost espresso-like infusion with deep, earthy flavors and woody, elemental aromatics. I like this tea because its history and geographical origin are as rich as its flavor."

**He'd never be caught drinking** Pabst Blue Ribbon

**Favorite book** "The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World" by Michael Pollan

**Downtime** Studying geography and food culture.

### they say

"He has an unequalled palate and an ability to taste and develop tea. ... He is a lot about subtlety, and it's a subtle drink. He can taste a tea and without knowing anything about its background, know how old a tea is, what region it's from, how it's been processed, how it's been stored. He has a really unique talent for it."

— Benjamin Harris,

*Rishi partner and friend since high school*

"I've seen a lot of tea businesses since I've started working with him, and I think his most unique trait is his ability to find sources internationally and work with local people at their level. Meaning, he doesn't come to them expecting them to know everything about how the United States market works. He goes there and learns from the culture."

— Sean O'Leary,

*A photojournalist and graphic designer who has traveled with Kaiser*

Depends on how you define underdog. With just more than a dozen employees, Rishi is now a multimillion-dollar company that distributes across the United States and in Canada, Korea, Japan and England. It imported more than 275 metric tons of tea last year, from locales such as China, Taiwan, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Argentina. Kaiser says Rishi has a 25 percent market share for organic loose tea in the U.S., and in the next year, it will double the number of organic tea leaves it imports.

It all started because of Kaiser's particularity for what he puts in his own cup.

The Milwaukee native double-majored in international relations and political science at Madison's Edgewood College. But unlike most coffee-fueled undergrads, Kaiser craved something different.

His passion for tea was born. Dissatisfied with the usual grocery store fare, which he found stale and underwhelming, he soon started experimenting with herbs and concocting his own brews at home. Friends started asking for them.

He fell in love with the rich history of tea, its esoterica. "It's natural and yet so intricate," he said.

The fascination stayed with him after college, when he spent more than a year traveling abroad.

"I realized this was my opportunity to import something rare and wonderful," he said.

He teamed up with friends and business partners Benjamin Harrison and Aaron Kapp. He's been friends with Harrison since high school; Kapp, since college.

"Many people say it's impossible to do business with your friends and family, but that's not true," Kaiser said.

This spring, he's taking some customers and his wife, Shin Ji Lee Kaiser, to China's Yunnan Province, believed to be the

birthplace of tea. The "eco adventure" includes a four-hour mountain climb to see a roughly 2,700-year-old "King Tea Tree."

"The history and origin of anything I taste or trade intrigues me as much as the flavor and aroma does," he said.

Right now, he's focused on product development. His business travels take him to city tea factories and remote mountain-top tea gardens. He meets with growers to try to persuade them to adopt organic farming methods (about 85 percent of Rishi's tea is organic, and they're constantly trying to find more farmers to meet demand), and he studies with tea masters.

Sometimes, while traveling, he'll be eating a cup of soup when his curiosity will be piqued by an unusual herb. He'll try to track it down.

"It's like being a wine sommelier, studying the soil, weather patterns, the grape," he said.

Like wine, he figured tea was something he could dedicate his entire life to studying, and still have more to learn.