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The Connoisseur

A world-class expert in tea, **JOSHUA KAISER** has turned Rishi Tea into an international phenomenon. **BY CRISTINA DAGLAS**

In a Bay View warehouse, Joshua Kaiser and his staff of tea experts, including business partner and fellow Rufus King grad Benjamin Harrison, produce more than 100 teas for award-winning Rishi Tea. Kaiser's brainchild (he started the company at age 24 in 1997), Rishi revolutionized tea production by going straight to the source – the growers abroad. Now, his loose-leaf tea has competition, from the mall-centric Teavana to well-respected regional operations such as Portland's Tao of Tea and New York's In Pursuit of Tea. But business remains strong, with revenue growing 15 to 26 percent annually in the past five years, making Rishi a more than \$10 million a year company.

Why tea?

I fell in love with it in college. I studied herbology and wildcrafting with some mentors, and sold herbal tea to professors and friends. It wasn't a big business, but it was fun. After college, I couldn't sit in one place. I was traveling in Thailand and Vietnam and Burma and Southwestern China, and I came back, and my stepfather said, "What are you

going to do with your life?" And I said, "I need to travel more. I'll figure that out." So I traveled for another year. And I decided this is it, I'm going to start this tea business.

How quickly did the public come around to Rishi?

When we started, people just wouldn't believe that great tea

could come from Milwaukee. But now we're looked upon as leaders. Nobody jokes anymore, "Are you a cheese company?"

So take us from farm to packaging.

Take one key tea – our organic fair trade Jade Cloud from Hubei, Central China. The harvest is in April. So I'll go there in March and talk to the farmers about what we did well last year and didn't do so well. Maybe you need to pick a little different than last year. Or adjust the roasting. Then we're there during the production time to taste and say, "OK, this is what we can accept. This is what we reject." Our expert cupper, that's either me or somebody working with me, is cherry-picking the different batches and reserving them in cold storage for Rishi Tea. At the end of production, I'll go back, retaste everything and come up with the standard blend of the season. Then we ship it by sea freight container to Milwaukee and put it in deep frozen storage. That's a pure single-origin green tea that is only dependent on our quality system and the farmers.

What about herbal tea?

There's a lot more involved on the U.S. side. We have a team of tea blenders and herbal experts, three or four people who have been with me for years. Take one of our top sellers, Tangerine Ginger, there are multiple products in it. We'll taste dozens of hibiscus from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Mexico, Jamaica, China, Laos. Then we cup and make a decision. Ginger same way: We taste Nigerian, Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Thai. We're very selective with every ingredient. We'll make long-term contracts with different growers and buy 15 months of our hibiscus, 15 months of ginger, 15 months of licorice root. We'll make the blend. Then we cure it for two

months, so all of the different aromas and energies harmonize and come together. Then we'll taste it. OK, it's good, release it, package it.

So you're control freaks?

Yeah, basically.

In a test, can someone really taste the difference between organic, loose-leaf tea and a tea bag?

Absolutely. It's night and day. Typically, tea bags are made with broken tea leaves that are middle- to very-low-quality material. The typical tea bag weighs 1.5 to 2 grams. Loose-leaf is a full-leaf tea. One serving is 3 to 5 grams, and you can control the brew time and make it as light or strong as you like.

What's your favorite tea?

Oolong tea from Taiwan. Japanese green tea from Southern Japan. And from China, I love jasmine tea.

You've called white tea scholar's tea. What in the world does that mean?

White tea is harvested in very early spring and consists of the immature bud of the tea plant. Its biochemistry is abundant in L-theanine, an amino acid only found in tea. There have been many studies in China and Japan about the effect of caffeine and L-theanine, working together to stimulate the central nervous system and create six hours of sustainable energy and immense alpha brain waves.

What's the future of gourmet tea?

I'm hoping for something to the effect of a tea barista society. Almost all the attention that goes into a perfect espresso-based coffee drink can be put into perfectly brewed tea. ■