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Rishi Tea has clearly positioned itself as a leader in the organic and fair-trade segment. Has this been the company's focus from inception?

From the start, Rishi's mission has been to deal directly with smallholder producers of connoisseur caliber teas and botanicals. The path of our mission led us to organic teas as we found that the best tasting and purest teas from most origins are organic.

Many people in our industry swore up and down that organic teas are inferior and more expensive than conventional teas. We never believed this and quickly realized that commonly held idea to be a fallacy only true to those brands and wholesalers dependent on the standard stocks of domestic brokers. Dealing directly with Asian producers allowed us to keep our organic prices in line with conventional premium tea prices by cutting out the middle men.

We also felt that much of the increased demand for tea was riding on the heels of medical reports. We recognized that our teas should not only taste good but should have a positive impact on the health of society and our environment. Fair Trade and Organic was a perfect fit with our philosophy and the demands of our customers.

Has anyone studied the affect of the pesticides found in conventional teas on the human body? Some have argued that the caffeine in tea might be more harmful. Is there any data to reconcile these views?

There have been reports that synthetic pesticides and chemical residues found in conventional tea "are not so bad" due to the fact that many are not water soluble and do not get into your cup. I think it is total rubbish. It only perpetuates the sort of non-sense that it is o.k. to go on polluting the environment and living conditions of the workers who pick our teas so long as the damage does not flow into our cups a world away.

We must think about the planet and those that live in the areas that make our teas. Even if synthetic chemicals (i.e. pesticides used in tea) do not cause "so much harm" to us we must think about the tea regions where the agri-chemical pollution truly takes its toll. These chemicals are not good for the land or the water supply so how could they be OK for us? There exists a choice and I think organic is the right choice for us and the planet.

US tea drinkers should be aware of the following before buying into the idea that chemical residues in tea are o.k. The EU has regulations on allowable residue levels in conventional teas that cover a broad range of common and not so common chemicals. The US does not have any regulations thereby teas that can not enter the EU because of high residue or impurity make their way into our cups in America. I think the US needs to regulate residues on imported food products like the EU. Tea is food and we should learn from the EU regulation. Until such time, I will stick with organic and low residue tested teas.

I think caffeine is a choice and can be a good thing or a bad thing based on your rate of consumption, diet and body constitution.

Tea has a more mild caffeine effect when compared to coffee. Tea also contains an amino acid known as L-theanine that relaxes the nervous system and contributes to the more relaxing effects of tea. It is known as a counter balance to caffeine and many feel that this is the key difference between the calm energy from tea and the hard coffee buzz. This is well noted in Japan and explains why most people do not fear the caffeine that comes with moderate tea consumption.

The idea that caffeine is as hazardous as chemical residues found in conventional tea seems crazy to me. I do not think anyone that knows the true facts about chemical pesticides and their impact on the planet and farm workers can say that the caffeine in tea is equally worrisome. I think that argument is weak.

Concern for the environment is luxury that the West adopted relatively recently. Are we being fair to the aspirations of the world's poor by applying our high standards to them so early in their development?

We have decimated forests and extracted resources with reckless abandon to achieve technological and economic dominance. Why should those in the so-called Third World not be allowed to follow our path?

I think it is right for consumers to demand what they want from producers. Now, the market demands organic and many of the producing nations must deliver to survive and grow within the trend.

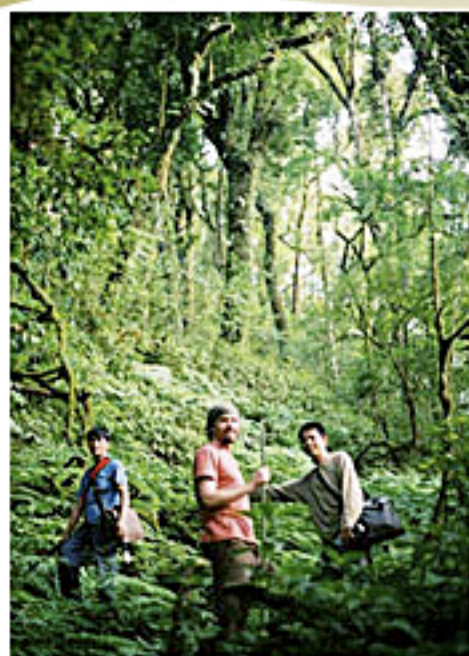
Maybe it is not fair but that is the way it is. I do not think that demanding organic is holding back the developing world's producers in any way. In fact, I see the opposite. Small holders that go organic tend to band together in order to strengthen their positions. Small holders that work together for organic production have a better chance at survival through joint networking and building long-term relationships with organic specific buyers. We have seen this within the Rishi supply chain and have never felt that demanding organic holds poor farmers back. Our organic farmers seem to have a more stable position and dependable prices than many of the conventional producers who are always at the whim of the spot buyers who are without loyalty or long-term relationships.

Organic certification of the farm and facilities is in many cases paid for by companies like Rishi and not the farmers. This encourages long-term relationships with farmers and helps to secure the farmers prices, position and sustainable development.

We as tea buyers or consumers can define quality as more than taste, aroma and leaf style. We can demand strict control of the agricultural inputs such as chemical pesticides and fertilizers. We can demand "organic", "shade grown" or "Fair Trade" products if that is what we want. The producers will provide the consumers what they demand, that is the nature of the marketplace, and I do not think we should feel guilty about that.

We are using the laws of economics to force change, conservation and organic development. The producers are getting paid for their goods. It is not the same as the tree huggers who demand that the cute, little, poor indigenous people remain stuck in their thatch huts only to preserve the Rainforests as theme parks and their so called "noble, un-spoiled identities" for rich tourists. Must they remain poor to be noble and true to their culture? I do not think so!

Most of the "utopian visionaries" in the conservation movement offer no economic development programs or viable means for the local people to enjoy sustainable economic growth. The organic movement offers much more than that. You can conserve natural resources and develop non-timber forestry products to bring economic prosperity to the developing world. In fact, many organic players like Rishi Tea, Forestrade and Guayaki Yerba Mate are able to use the revenue from organic, non-timber forestry products to support on-going conservation and sustainable development programs in the developing world. The organic movement, in my experience is fair and well suited to the needs of poor farmers.



Joshua in Yunnan Jungle