



Time for Rishi

By Bea Bourgeois

WHILE MANY of us can't imagine starting the day without our morning coffee, others are discovering the delights of brewing a cup or two of tea as a refreshing, tasteful—and healthful—alternative.

According to Ben Harrison, one of three owner/partners of Rishi Tea in Bay View, "We're not the anti-coffee crowd, but there are literally thousands of different types of tea, and most North Americans are not aware of them. Like wine, you're going to find something you like."

"Tea is a creature comfort," he noted, "and it's wonderfully simple, something to be savored and enjoyed. Maybe you don't like green tea, but you'll find something you like. A good starting point is to read the description of any of the teas or botanical blends we offer and if something looks like it will appeal to you, give it a try."

"Life is an adventure. Try new things. There are thousands of different flavors and profiles out there," Harrison said. "One of the great things about artisan tea is that it has complexity, character and characteristics that are native to its origins and a spectrum of flavors that is truly vast. Tea actually strengthens the immune system and helps prevent illness, so it's an effective preventative in addition to being a delightful beverage."

"Brewing with loose leaf tea is also a very simple process," added owner/partner, Aaron Kapp. "We have brewing baskets for under \$10, and you can drop them into a wide variety of cup sizes. Just put the tea in the basket, add hot water, put the cover on and you have a delicious cup of tea. Or use a hand strainer right over the cup. No envelope, no bag coming off the string. With a tea bag, you use it once and toss it away."

Loose leaf tea is far superior to, and less expensive than, the tea bag variety, Kapp explained. "One of the stigmas of loose tea is that it's expensive, and it's not, because you can infuse a serving of tea leaves multiple times so the cost of a cup of our tea per serving is eight to 20 cents per cup, which is incredibly inexpensive since it's so high in quality."

The company's history actually began when Joshua Kaiser, Harrison and Kapp were school-age friends in the 1990's. However, no one could have predicted that they would be reunited in the late 1990's as partners in Rishi Tea.

Harrison went off to Bowdoin College in Maine; Kapp went to UW; and Kaiser to Edgewood College in Madison. As Harrison explained, "Josh graduated from Edgewood in 1995 and traveled in Asia for several months, and that was the beginning of his exposure to tea. From that, Rishi Tea grew and he started the company in 1997. The name is a Sanskrit word that means 'sage' or 'teacher.' Josh is our tea expert who spends about half a year in Asia, handling all of our international sourcing and supply side business there."

Kaiser convinced Kapp to leave a job in Madison, and Harrison to leave his position with a language translation firm in New York City, to join the fledgling tea company. "I quit my job and moved back to Milwaukee at the end of 1999," Harrison explained.

"I worked with Josh from the beginning and the synergy was obviously there," Kapp added. "I was looking for something long term, and anybody who was interested in

uncompromising quality had my immediate attention."

From humble beginnings, today Rishi Tea operates out of a 550,000-sq.-ft. building with almost 28,000-sq.-ft. of blending, production, order processing and marketing space. The company markets more than 100 different types of loose leaf teas, herbs and botanicals, with close to 90 percent of them organic. All formulating and blending is done in-house.

"We have established a very close working relationship with our suppliers," said Harrison, "and that's one of the things that makes Rishi very rare. There are hundreds of tea companies in the U.S., but fewer than half a dozen that work on what we call a garden-direct basis. That means we go to the source and work directly with the tea producers."

"Most other tea companies buy from producers or other distribution channels. What we do allows us to get very high quality rare tea—in many cases teas that are custom made for Rishi. Because we don't have any middleman, we're able to bring in seasonal, fresh, high quality teas year-round and bring them to market at very approachable price points," Harrison said.

Rishi teas come primarily from China, Japan and Taiwan, with some from Sri Lanka and India. "We work with pretty serious criteria that are first and foremost about artisan quality," Harrison explained. "From there, organic product is important to us. A vast amount of our product is organic, under a federally mandated, regulated labeling system. It involves everything from the dirt that the tea plants are planted in—to the invoice for that particular product."

"We have established a strong relationship with our suppliers," he added, "and we don't do spot buying where you'll buy from Garden A one year and go to Garden B the next year to get a better price. We work with the same gardens every year. As our company grows and we need new projects or more tea growers, we rank additional gardens because we're always looking for new teas and

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suppliers and sources. But we do the majority of our business with our existing gardens."

Rishi Tea is a Fair Trade company. Harrison explained that means, "It's a way of doing business in a socially conscious manner that is designed to protect and empower the producer. The employees—the workers—will have a bank account in their name and it's for the people of the community who work the fields and gardens."

"When we purchase raw materials from a fair trade certified garden, there's a degree of auditing that takes place that ensures that not only are the people buying the raw material paying a premium on every kilo or pound that's purchased, but that the premium goes directly into the workers' account and doesn't pass through the owners of the estate or garden."

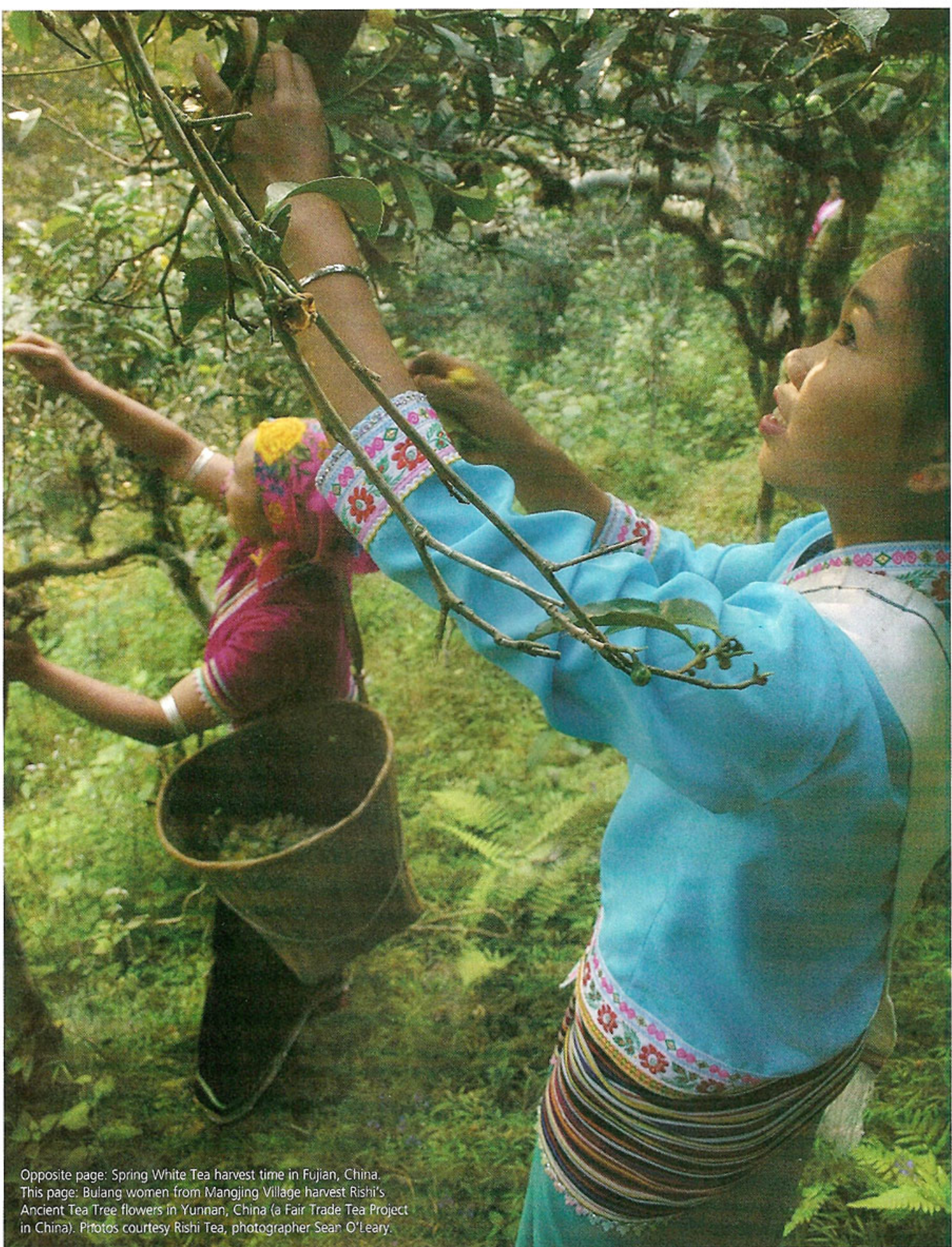
Kapp added, "I have to wire funds directly into their account at the end of each quarter, and they're responsible for administering these funds for improving the education in their community, for health care, infrastructure development and things they need to elevate their quality of life."

Rishi's best selling tea is a green tea called Jasmine Pearl, said Harrison. "Earl Grey is very popular, as is Masala Chai, and three or four of our white teas from China and our green teas from Japan." Rishi develops the formulas and produces all their blends in-house.

They also carry a variety of caffeine-free herbs and botanicals including ginger, cardamom, lemongrass, licorice root and peppermint. "You steep them like tea and drink them like tea," said Kapp. "One of our best sellers is a tangerine ginger blend, which is particularly nice in the cold weather."

Although Rishi Tea doesn't have a retail store, consumers can find their products at local retail outlets including Outpost Natural Foods, Sendik's, Whole Foods, Beans & Barley and Anaba Tea Room in Shorewood, or order online at www.Rishi-Tea.com. ■

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Opposite page: Spring White Tea harvest time in Fujian, China.
This page: Bulang women from Mangjing Village harvest Rishi's
Ancient Tea Tree flowers in Yunnan, China (a Fair Trade Tea Project
in China). Photos courtesy Rishi Tea, photographer Sean O'Leary.