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TWO

THE MAGAZINE FOR SPECIALTY COFFEE & TEA PROFESSIONALS SINCE 1992



by Chris Ryan

TEA IN-TUITION

Retailers get smart
about the leaf

For years, Lurline Wagner worked as a microbiologist, studying organisms and viruses, often in the seclusion of a quiet laboratory. All the while, she harbored an interest in tea that continued to grow until she decided to open a tearoom with her husband. Wagner's knowledge base was little more than curiosity in the early days of mapping out her business plan, so she immersed herself in a self-imposed education program, hopping into one classroom after another (teahouses, lecture halls, cupping rooms) to learn the ins and outs of teahouse management and tea quality. With newfound know-how, she and her husband opened Cuppa Tea Company in Richmond, Va.

In what many professionals refer to as the golden age of tea education, there is no shortage of curriculums out there. Some are quality-focused, teaching about different types of tea, while others target the business side, giving students the information they need to run a shop. Educational opportunities for professionals are plentiful, providing in-depth, practical knowledge about the leaf.

AN EDUCATIONAL START

While tea's story is thousands of years old, tea education is so young that it wouldn't warrant a chapter in history books, especially in the United States. The education movement has grown quickly though, largely as a reaction to the growing market. "There's a lot of people that created companies and launched them over the last five to 10 years," says Joe Simrany of Tea Association of the U.S.A. "Many of these companies are now worth five to 10 million dollars." Shops have had to catch up fast, sometimes struggling to dispense information as soon as they grasp it—and not always learning it in time. "Many of these people have limited background with tea," Simrany says. "There's a lot of misinformation out there."

Tea education aims to correct that. One of the initial forays stateside was the American Premium Tea Institute (APTI), formed in 1995 to educate professionals. The APTI offered a series of courses that would form the foundation of the next wave of lessons, led by the Specialty Tea Institute (STI).

A division of the Tea Association of the U.S.A., STI is geared toward helping tea businesses succeed. In 2004, STI added a certification program, taking APTI's course-driven approach while adding testing and completion requirements that earn participants a certificate when they finish. Mike Spillane, of the widely respected tea importing company G.S. Haly, helped develop the APTI plan, and he says STI took it to the next level. "We got some people in there that had a bigger plan, and they organized the material better and made it more of an academic curriculum. So it's actually far superior today than it was when APTI had it."

One goal of the STI certification was to create standardization, a common set of guidelines for the industry developed by esteemed professionals. "All the people who teach these classes have been involved with what they're teaching for years," says Donna Feldman of Tea Education Alliance, which helps develop the STI tracks. The STI curriculum eventually will cover five levels of certification; levels one and two are already in practice, and level three, made up of five segments, will debut two segments at this month's World Tea Expo in Las Vegas. Levels one and two are devoted to the foundations of tea, covering the five basic types and the two traditional styles of production, while level three takes a more scientific approach to evaluating each type. "If someone gets through each of these courses, they're going to have the equivalent of a college education with a major in tea," Simrany says.

Wagner of Cuppa Tea Company attended the first two levels in 2006, providing her with background information she needed before opening. She also learned the virtues of cupping, which she implemented at her shop. "We have tea tastings and classes ... customers are always interested to try different teas," she says. "They get to know which of the teas they're going to be buying." Having tastings led by a knowledgeable purveyor assures customers they are being led in the right direction. "As an owner of a business, you have to educate people about your products," Wagner says. "People love to go to a place where the owners know what they're doing."

Keeping up on your game also corrects misinformation. "It's pretty amazing, some of the wild stories I've heard from people standing behind a counter, selling tea," says Feldman. "It's not uncommon in any industry ... you always want to make sure the information that's out there is accurate."

LEARNING THE OPERATIONS SIDE

While STI graduates may walk away with a whole lot of tea knowledge to impart to their customers, the curriculum does not address how to run a shop. "It doesn't deal with the business side—how do you open up a business, how do you run an Internet business, how do you attract customers, how do you choose a store location?" says Bill Waddington, owner of Minnesota's TeaSource and another professional involved with STI certification.

The good news: Classes on how to run a store are taught nationwide (see p. 75). "You cut out the answer to [business questions like] what kind of detergent, who's my supplier for the dishwasher, how do I get the plumbing done, who does the electrical," says Jennifer Petersen, founder of Carnelian Rose Tea

Company and Tea Advice. "What part of this can I do myself and what can't I do myself? That all gets done in a business class." It is up to retailers, then, to apply the information to their stores in their own way. "Of course you don't copycat that, you want to create your own," says Wagner.

A different approach is taken by Dawnya Sasse, who owns the training Web site startateabusiness.com, which launched in 2003. After running a shop for seven years, during which she received many requests from retailers who wanted to learn more about the leaf, Sasse created the online program. It contains 30 days of material that students can complete over a three-month period. The training doesn't just cover how to open a location; students can pick from a profile of 17 tea-related businesses to study. "We are not [necessarily] looking to help you start a tearoom," Sasse says. "We're looking to help you find the tea business that is right for your personal lifestyle."

The online format allows for a global student body, but also for flexibility among them. Mary Mauldin, who took Sasse's

course this year, appreciated the research tool. "Being online, what I found myself doing was [the course] work, and then I would get off and spend hours more searching other sites," she says. "People want more streaming information so that they can learn at home in segments, and that too is a reflection of the changing times," says Peterson of Carnelian Rose. "I think all of us need to keep up on the technology."

NO INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Though education provides vital information and a foundation for working in tea, those who've developed the programs are quick to point out that taking classes does not make one an authority. "You can't be a tea professional without working with it every day," Spillane says. He says that no one should rely too heavily on a certificate, and cites a U.S. college that recently sought an instructor to teach a course about tea. A man with 54 years of industry experience was recommended, but "the university wouldn't let him teach the class because he wasn't certified," Spillane says. "That's perfect example of putting too much stock in these classes."

Spillane sees the value in the certification, but he doesn't think it's the end-all, be-all. "People have to feel like they've accomplished something," he says. "And that's why the STI certifie



GET TO CLASS: Checking infused leaves at an STI certification in San Francisco.

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that you've passed certain levels. They don't certify that you're a tea professional, they just certify that you've taken these classes." Simrany of the STI agrees, saying that the STI's intention is to get information to people, but not to deem them an authority. "We're aware of our responsibility," he says. "We're aware that nobody can have the final word, including STI."

Courses offered by the government are free, while the tea-business ones cost about \$2,000 on average, and the STI classes are \$325 to \$450 per level. As a nonprofit, the STI puts the funds

TEA BUSINESS COURSES

A sampling of what's out there:

- Elmwood Inn Fine Teas' "Tea 101: The Art of Owning a Tea Business" a three-day seminar in Perryville, Ky. elmwoodinn.com/tea_seminars/TEA101.html

- "The TEA School," a two-day course in Connecticut from *Tea A Magazine* editor Pearl Dexter. teamag.com/index_files/Page2617.htm

- Multiple times yearly, Sandestin, Fla.'s Magnolia & Ivy hosts an educational conference titled "Open a Tearoom God's Way," covering topics such as financing, marketing/publicity and religion. magnoliaivy.com/index2.php?page=5

- "Tea Advice," from Vancouver, Wash.-based Carnelian Rose Tea Company, a series of lessons with focuses ranging from how to open to how to maintain a shop as well as how to market it. teaadvice.com

- The Small Business Association and Internal Revenue Service also offer free classes geared toward helping independent locations get started. sba.gov and irs.gov

into offering more courses, including one in development that would include a trip to a tea-origin country. "There's nothing that takes the place of actually going and being in the tea field and being in the processing plant and seeing it made and being a part of that process," says Feldman.

FURTHERING THE INDUSTRY

Professionals tend to agree that the most effective way to dive into the industry is to take business-oriented classes first—to find a focus in the world of tea—then add a quality-focused program like STI's. Or if a shop is up and running, a retailer can forgo the business courses and focus on expanding their knowledge of specific teas. "I think it's best learned through classes and through experience," says Waddington. "If you have the opportunity to experience working at a busi-

ness and take classes on the side, that's the optimal situation."

The U.S. tea industry is growing steadily, and education among professionals is part of the reason, along with increasing consumer awareness. "It's being bolstered by so many positive consumer trends that the popularity of tea is going to grow throughout the next two decades," says Simrany. Interest has grown enough that a crop of consumer classes has popped up, including those offered by the Urasenke Foundation, with offices in U.S. cities including New York and San Francisco. Steering that growth toward quality among both consumers and professionals is key. "I think tea classes are necessary," Spillane says. "It helps to create a groundswell. The specialty tea industry has to start from the bottom up, not the top down, and I think that education is the key to that." ■

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