

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun, wearing a red qipao with gold trim and a decorative brooch, sits behind a table. She is wearing a headset microphone. On the table in front of her are several pieces of blue and white patterned tea ware, including a teapot, cups, and a glass dome. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

The Only U.S. Trade Show Exclusively for Tea:

World Tea Expo

By Mary Lou Heiss

One way to tell a fad from a trend is whether or not a trade show or exhibition develops around it to support and drive interest in the product, idea or topic. In the case of tea, World Tea Expo fits that bill. This past May, 2009, World Tea Expo marked its 6th consecutive year and for the second time in three years, World Tea Expo has been named one of *Tradeshaw Weeks'* "Fastest 50", the annual list of the most vibrant events in North America.

Trade shows come and go, often being a victim of a segment of a market or a trend that failed to find a committed audience. The best shows grow and thrive despite the underpinning of the economy because they are tied to larger platforms of business, industry or market direction, not to individual situations. They also bring change and a new 'something' to their yearly events when fresh breath is needed.

With all this in mind, I think that World Tea Expo does a terrific job doing what it does: hosting the singular tea-only event in the U.S. for an industry that

has experienced eye-popping double-digit growth over the past six years. This conference and expo began in 2003 as the much smaller but ambitious "Take Me 2 Tea Expo" in Las Vegas. Back then, the show attracted approximately 1,200 attendees and 65 exhibitors from around the world, who unknowingly became pioneers in the tea industry when they participated in the first tea-only conference and exhibition held in the U.S.

Today, the number of attendees and exhibitors are greater, and many valuable benefits have been added to the roster of events that occur during the three day conference and exhibition. I have attended World Tea Expo three times: twice as an exhibitor selling copies of our tea books and once, this year, as an attendee. I find it to be a well-run show with good, positive energy. Tea is an upbeat subject, and the promoters of World Tea Expo have succeeded in making their event fun and educational as well as about the business of selling, marketing and promoting tea. Many of the attendees that I

have spoken with are either new to the tea business or trying to decide what direction to go in this growing industry. But either way they bring a new vision and enthusiasm to the event every year.

It was quite apparent to anyone in attendance in a previous year that the 2009 expo had markedly fewer attendees and exhibitors; whereas I remember aisles filled with people moving in and out of vendor booths as they made their way down, this expo was less crowded and much easier to maneuver. According to Vanessa Kelley, Attendee Registration Manager, attendance was down in 2009 about 25% to 3,482 attendees. Vendor attendance was also down roughly the same percentage.

But the show promoters did an excellent job of keeping the quality of the show high. Babette Donaldson, owner of Emma Lee Books and one of the bloggers on the World Tea Expo website is quoted as saying in an interview with *Gourmet Retailer* magazine: “The size of the show was noticeably smaller, but the quality never reflected a sense of disappointment or hinted at cutting corners—quite the opposite—I believe this will be one of the years all attendees and vendors will remember.”

For me, a trade show is only as good as the quality of its exhibitors because that is the primary reason that I (and I assume most other attendees as well) support a particular show. The other reason is to network with colleagues and exhibitors that I have a long-standing business relationship with. A lot of insights and little gems of information can be gleaned when chatting socially with people, so while well-developed special events at expos are nice, it is the tidbits of factual information told to me by exhibitors as well as their thoughts and perceptions that make my attendance essential.

Frankly, I was disappointed with the mix of exhibitors this year. A large proportion of these firms were selling goods that are peripheral to the business of selling premium tea and which pop up whenever a food or beverage becomes trendy. For me, I am saddened to see products such as tea-flavored snacks or tea-themed costume jewelry and accessories, note cards, health bars, tea-flavored chocolates and candy, herbal supplements and extracts, as well as tea enhancers and liquid antioxidants increase exposure in the exhibition hall. For me, it made the expo feel like an event that was designed to appeal to a broad, tea-interested general public rather than a professional, business-to-business trade show.

Throughout the two days I spent roaming the expo, I noticed that many of these exhibitors were not especially busy. Some I spoke with seemed a bit disorganized and had left price lists or catalogues behind in their hotel room. It felt to me that for a portion of the exhibitors, this was not their primary livelihood but a love-of-tea-turned-hobby-business, which never inspires confidence. As an example, I placed an order for lovely hand-made tea cozies with a very nice lady who was exhibiting for the first time. She had a difficult time pecking my small order into her laptop computer (writing it out on a pad of paper would have sufficed). Sadly, my order has not yet shown up, so this experience did not end well for either of us.

I was surprised at the absence of several tea importers who had been exhibiting in previous years: for a tea expo this was disappointing. These firms specialized in loose-leaf tea and each brought a different type of tea to the marketplace: Assam Tea Company, Den's Tea, Silk Road Teas, Simpson & Vail, and Tao of Tea. Similarly, I also noticed that several companies who specialize in packaged tea were also absent this year: Black & Green Co., Keiko Tea, SerendipiTea, and Two Leaves and a Bud Tea Co. As a traditionalist looking for and concerned with the future of artisan tea, I am troubled when I see tea firms disappearing from a tea expo. I wonder what the future holds for the focus of the show if this trend continues.

On the other hand, I thought that some of the best displays and most interesting selections of tea and botanicals were being shown by representatives from tea companies in China, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Taiwan. In some cases, the exhibitors spoke English or had someone on hand who did, and could easily get their message across about their products. They were able to supply those interested with information about how to purchase their teas and transact directly with them. I requested samples from several of these companies and promptly followed up with orders for our shop from those that we found the most interesting.

Unfortunately, other vendors spoke little English and had no information (in English or otherwise) for the taking. I wondered what they hoped to accomplish by exhibiting at this expo; perhaps they were primarily hoping to do business with one or two American tea importers. Many of these representatives sat in their booths looking quite forlorn—a frustrating situation for all especially given that the products looked interesting and desirable.



In sharp contrast, the Taiwan Tea Manufacturers Association (TTMA) reserved a large section of one aisle and used it to their best advantage promoting their teas in a very professional manner. A contingent of representatives from the TTMA were present, as were several tea and teaware vendors who came over from Taiwan (plus Tillerman Tea from Napa CA) and spent the entire three days introducing attendees to the delicious nature of Taiwan oolong teas through constant sampling and one-on-one discussion about the characteristics of their various teas.

The representatives from Taiwan were most enthusiastic; the pride they felt in their special tea was infectious and genuine. Throughout the day they repeatedly showed a well-produced video clip that explained the difference between the various styles of oolong teas produced in Taiwan. They also utilized a small stage and periodically featured speakers, including Norwood Pratt, Bill Waddington, and myself, on a small stage to promote the goodness of Taiwan oolong teas and share stories about tea travels and experiences we all have had in Taiwan.

Other products more directly related to the business of selling tea were also represented and ran the gamut from high speed, automatic teabag packing machines to customized water filtration systems for cafes and tea salons; teaware of all design and fashion; hot water dispensing units; agencies who test and grant teas with organic status; agencies who analyze tea and botanicals for pesticide residue; custom-label printers, and more. Additionally, companies selling botanicals and herbs and spices were also represented, as were companies who produce flavorings for tea and convenience products like teabags, tea sachets, and tea pouches.

The largest (and most difficult) decision for attendees, especially those just starting out in a new tea business or those still undecided which direction to pursue, has always been choosing what type of tea to sell and from whom it should be purchased. When we began our tea business 35 years ago, the number of tea importers was very small, so the options were limited. And so was the selection of tea being imported at that time. As I moved down the aisles and perused all the myriad teas and ways that tea is marketed today, I real-

ized that while the decision of whether to sell loose-leaf tea or packaged tea or teabags still exists, there are many more considerations and niche market options that compound the selection process.

By far the largest increase in products is from firms offering branded, packaged tea and tisanes. And, in many cases, these products are not about the quality or origin of the tea anymore. Some of these brands emphasize upscale, luxury packaging; a stress-reducing, healthy-lifestyle ‘pamper-thyself’ feeling, or posturing certain agendas, such as teas that have been hyped up with additional antioxidants or that support value-added incentives such as Fair Trade, organic, ETP, Equitrade, etc.

I could not help but notice that at the end of the day a large percentage of attendees were lugging multiple bags filled with brochures, literature, and small samples back to their hotel room. Many looked a bit dazed from looking at so much tea and hearing so many sales pitches. From experience I can say that it is daunting to pick one’s way through all the sales talk, marketing, hype, etc. to find the products that make the most sense to sell. It is a dog-eat-dog world in the hall (in the nicest professional way) because everyone is selling “the world’s finest tea” and is vying for some manner of shelf-space in all of these tea businesses.

This brings me back to my original comment about the importance of the exhibitors at a trade show. I truly believe that it is essential to meet the people with whom you will be doing business and to have some one-on-one ‘face time’ with them. Despite the image that a catalogue or website may project, nothing can replace meeting someone in person and hopefully, sharing a cup of tea. So much marketing these days is all smoke and mirrors, so if the vibe with someone I am talking with is not right, I keep looking until I find the people whose passion for tea, ethics, philosophy and attitude is compatible with mine.

In addition to the hours the exhibition hall is open, World Tea Expo also offers a full roster of educational sessions and special events that are held outside the exhibition hall. This year, attendees could choose between numerous offerings in the following groups: Core Educational Sessions, Executive & Technical classes, Skill Building Workshops, Focused Tastings, Special Events, and Super Workshops.

I particularly like the Special Events, which are a great opportunity for attendees to see and experience unique tea-related demonstrations. It is just this kind of experience that helps people in the tea business to

understand a little more about the vast and wonderful dimensions of tea and tea culture. In 2006, for instance, the first ever Tea Auction on American soil took place at World Tea Expo. The auction was sponsored by the Nilgiri Tea Producers, and many wonderful specialty teas were auctioned to an enthusiastic crowd.

This year, the special events included demonstrations with an Asian flair:

- Modern Teism (a demonstration of *Chanoyu*) by Master Sen So’Oku (Sen Masayoshi) Zuiensai, 15th Generation Heir to the Mushakoji-Senke School of Tea, Japan
- Chinese Tea Ceremony: the art of brewing, serving and offering tea
- Taiwan Oolong Rolling Demonstration: a rare opportunity to see tea production masters hand-roll and shape semi-ball style Oolong tea rolled
- How *Matcha* is Made: watching hand-turned stone grinding mills turn out finely powdered *matcha*
- Top Tea Cocktail Competition

For several years, celebrity chefs were on board to give cooking demonstrations and create dishes using tea. This year, attendees had a chance to watch the Top Tea Cocktail Competition, in which the top 15 drink recipe finalists squared off against each other in front of a panel of beverage professionals for a chance to have their recipe receive national publicity.

And, what good is a trade show if it does not foster a little competition among friends and dole out awards for who has the best tea? For participating exhibitors, the World Tea Championship (WTC), in its second year, was something to look forward to. According to a statement by the World Tea Expo, this competition was “an independent competition, judged by professional cuppers and major retail buyers of tea, to distinguish the highest quality and best tasting teas commercially available in the North American marketplace. The event was open to exhibitors and sponsors of the 2009 World Tea Expo.”

This year, the championship awarded forty-two 1st, 2nd and 3rd place honors to teas entered into two main classes: Hot Tea Class and Iced Tea Class. Within each class, multiple categories (each with separate judges) were featured. The competition did not consider tea from all that is exhibited at the expo but from tea that tea companies chose to submit. Each company who wished to enter a tea into the competition paid an



entry fee of approximately \$250.00 per tea that they entered. This of course, limits and controls the pool of entries, but nevertheless, this year 41 firms entered close to 300 different teas into the competition.

Those of us in the tea business can certainly agree that interest in tea continues to spark new customer curiosity as well as renewed interest from established tea drinkers who are branching out into new tea tastes. Whether tea is consumed in a local teahouse or tea salon, prepared at home or drunk as a bottled tea beverages (Ready-To-Drink) it is clear that tea sales in the U.S. are booming and show no signs of slowing.

Imports of tea into the U.S. in 2008 were projected to be 257 million pounds, an increase of 17 million pounds over the 2007 import figures. Considering that the United States have been predominantly a coffee drinking nation since the days of the Boston Tea Party, these import figures represent a respectable amount of tea. Within this total, black tea accounts for approximately 81 percent of imports, followed by green tea at 17 percent, and the balance being made up with Oolong and white tea. Somewhere in these figures lies a minuscule amount of Puerh and yellow tea.

According to the Tea Association of America, the specialty tea industry is the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. tea industry. This does not mean the largest segment of the tea industry, but the one that is gaining

the most ground, fast. In fact, Joe Simrany, president of the Tea Association believes that the specialty tea segment is “in its infancy and is going to continue to grow and grow.”

Figures released by the National Coffee Association confirm that consumption of coffee in 2008 has held steady at 54 percent of the 25+ years of age adult population, a figure that has remained constant over the past four years. But coffee consumption dropped from 37 percent to 29 percent among millennial generation consumers in the 18-24 age category. While these figures suggest little change in the habits of coffee drinkers over the age of 25, and that a large percentage of Americans do not drink coffee at all, the millennial generation is on record as being the largest growing segment of the tea beverage industry.



