Tucson tea party

by Gillian - Sunday, March 08, 2015

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From peddling chai tea at a farmer's market to a brand new manufacturing plant, Manish Shah and his Maya Tea Company have barely stood still. And with a stake in a new tea shop chain, there's more to come. By Gillian Drummond. Cover photo courtesy of Maya Tea Company

Photo courtesy of Maya Tea Company

An Indian man selling tea in the Arizona desert. Manish Shah smiles at the incongruity of it.

But even though Maya Tea Company has its roots in Tucson, and even though its products are a familiar sight in the city's restaurants and coffee shops, today Tucson serves as a base for something much bigger. The Maya Tea blends and concentrates are transported to around 40 states and more than 1000 restaurants.
Manish Shah. Photo by Jocelyn Warner-Brokamp

Demand is so high that the company just opened an 8,000 sq ft manufacturing and packing plant on the west side of Tucson - an expansion of an old warehouse building and a place that smells more delicious than possibly any business warehouse in existence. There's plenty of empty space in the plant, and that's deliberate. Manish has high hopes. He says he overbuilt because he's anticipating even more demand.

One of his major clients is Tea2Go, a chain of restaurants he supplies with private-label loose leaf tea. The Lubbock, Texas based firm is growing mainly through franchises, with 13 stores open, 24 under construction and plans to be in 58 cities. A Tempe location will open this week, marking the company's first move into Arizona. A Phoenix location opens in May and two Tucson locations in June (a third will follow on the University of Arizona campus in September).
Manish will have a stake in the first of the Tea2Go locations in Tucson, which will be corporate-owned rather than franchises. And with Maya Tea Company close by, the Tucson locations will be test beds for new products, says Tea2Go president Jeff Hunt. "We plan to try out our new Christmas line first, also some summer teas, like pomegranate," says Jeff.

If the idea of Texans and Arizonans championing a cup of tea seems odd, Jeff points out that his company's biggest seller is not hot tea but iced. "Iced tea in Texas is a huge deal."

It's a huge deal in and around Tucson too, where temperatures are above 80 degrees seven months of the year, and hover around 100 degrees for three of them. Maya Tea Company's second biggest seller is traditional black iced tea, which is big in restaurants. Its best seller, though, is the Maya Chai concentrate that helped launch him on his journey.

For a guy who began by peddling a loose-leaf chai tea blend at the Oro Valley Farmers' Market just north of Tucson, the growth of Maya Tea Company is impressive. So what's Manish's secret? "I think we do a good job of crafting teas that are real approachable. We use good ingredients. I think we're just nice to deal with. We do business the right way." Maya Tea's slogan is "Serious tea for not-so-serious people". He scoffs a little at how seriously other tea companies treat the product. "It's just tea, chill out," he says.
A collection of ingredients at Maya Tea's new manufacturing plant. Photo by Gillian Drummond

That's not to say Manish is chilled out, however. At the Tucson headquarters of Maya Tea, a blink-and-you-miss-it converted house on the city's north side, he is polite, amenable and frank. He's also busy. He may be sitting still behind a desk, but you can practically see the wheels turning in that entrepreneurial head. Much as he loves tea, Manish admits it's business that he really loves. "I always thought I'd be in business in general. I would do this if it was something else [other than tea]," says the man who is also co-executive director of Heirloom Farmers Markets in Tucson. Apparently it runs in the family. He shares his office with his father and brother, both investors. Next door is the bright blue retro motel that is Paul's Hide-A-Way Lodge, formerly owned by Manish's father and the place where Manish and his family grew up.
Mixing an apricot blend at Maya Tea's new plant. Photo by Gillian Drummond

Three miles to the north of Maya Tea is Tucson Mall and the Dillards department store where Manish used to sell Ralph Lauren polo shirts and, during his down times, daydream about possible business launches and do a lot of sums on his calculator. He was still employed by Dillards when he began selling his tea at that first farmer's market. The year was 1996 and chai tea was coming into vogue in the USA. Making a good pot of chai was second nature to this child of Indian parents. During his childhood in Manhattan, he was preparing tea at an early age for a family who would consume three or four pots a day. Then came the family’s move to Tucson, a degree in psychology for Manish, a flirtation with coffee, then a renewed love affair with tea. He now favors oolong, which he makes simply by boiling a pot of water on a stove.
Matcha green tea powder. Photo courtesy of Maya Tea Co.

When Manish put together his first blend of chai - using ginger, cinnamon, vanilla, cloves, cardamom and black pepper - it wasn't great at all, he says. "But people loved it. The second [batch] I fixed and improved, and by the third batch I got to where it was really good." People at the farmer's market began asking for more, and he added other blends.

Meanwhile, his day job wasn't going well. "It was was 2001. We had 9/11. Business tanked. I was a little mouthy. I said a few things I shouldn't have [at Dillards]." A financial gift from his family helped him pay off his mortgage and give him some breathing room to grow his company. For a while, he had another company manufacturing and packing his tea, but with the new facility in Tucson he's bringing production back home.
Another successful blend for Maya Tea Co. is Prickly Pear, despite Manish's initial opposition. He held firm on going the fruity tea route for a long time but his staff wore him down. "I thought it was gross. I don't like my teas prettied up," he says. He was also conscious about not getting too cliched: a southwest company providing a typically southwestern-style tea. Prickly pear is now one of their most popular products.

Maya Tea has been approached by another major tea shop chain to be a supplier. This one is in India. If it happens and Manish finds himself taking his tea product back to his home country, he'll have even more to smile about.

* For more about Maya Tea Company, including recipes, products and accessories, visit mayatea.com

As we head into spring, find more ways to enjoy your tea with these recipes.

Chai Frappé - for day
Maya Tea Company shot glass, mayatea.com. Photo courtesy of Maya Tea Co.

1 oz Maya or Devi Chai Concentrate

11 oz coconut milk, regular milk, soy milk, half and half
(or any combination of the above)

Blend with ice in a blender until smooth.

and for night . . .

Chaitini

2 oz Maya Chai or Devi Chai Concentrate

1 oz Baileys

1/2 oz Frangelico

Photo courtesy of Maya Tea Co.
1/2 oz Kahlua

1/2 oz vanilla vodka

1 oz half & half

Combine in a cocktail shaker with ice and shake vigorously. Strain into a cocktail glass and garnish with cinnamon ground or stick, vanilla bean or chocolate shavings.

(Source for Chaitini recipe: mayachai.com)