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OUR COMPLETE FALL 2011 REPORT



TWO FOR TEA

Singapore's very own tea titan The Wellness Group's creators Manoj M. Murjani and Taha Bouqdir believe that some like it hot. By Andre Frois

PORTRAIT RONALD LEONG

my first visit to a TWG salon was like being transported to a distant, charming place. I didn't feel like I was having afternoon tea in ION Orchard at all.

Taha Bouqdir, founder of TWG, reaffirms my sentiments, "we are not selling tea – we are selling a cultural and historical experience in a teacup."

"We are focused on creating a moment for our patrons," interjects his partner, Manoj Murjani. It's hard to not notice how Murjani's more outspoken and animated nature plays perfectly off Bouqdir's languid demeanour. We are tucked away in a quaint corner of their Takashimaya salon, whose every slightest detail of its vintage-style interior has been scrutinised by Bouqdir and Murjani. From its handsome mahogany countertops and sculpted hardwood panels, to the very shape of its sugar spoons and the length of its tea bags' strings, each tea boutique has been meticulously tailored by the dynamic duo, so that "every unfolding of the product carries an element of surprise".

"We both happened to be in Paris at the same time and we both knew we wanted to do something with our obsession with tea," he says, describing his first chance meeting with Bouqdir. "We decided to set up in Singapore, because we believed that it was Asia's time to rise," pronounces Murjani, echoing the same faith which led them to flag off their tea venture in Republic Plaza in 2008, at the heart of the bustling Central Business District.

"We are twins who agreed to grow up in different places," cracks the boisterous Murjani. "Our mutual understanding quells each other's worries and concerns, which helps us arrive at decisions quickly." The veracity of their almost psychic connection is validated by numerous coworkers, who when asking for a decision from both constantly travelling partners via email, have received detailed but identical decisions from both.

Constantly jet-setting around the globe and opening new salons in Hong Kong, Dubai and Kuala Lumpur soon, the tea twins, most notably, have made their mark in Harrods in London – their teas sit a counter away from the world-famous luxury department store's own trusted house brand. Never has breaking into Harrods caused this much of a sensation, since Mohamed Al-Fayed's alleged dip into Tiny Rowland's Harrods safe deposit box. TWG teas are now available in 21 countries around the world, and probably more, by the time you finish reading this story.

MANOJ MURJANI, THE RELENTLESS PERFECTIONIST

Manoj Murjani laughs heartily when we broach the topic of what exactly his second language is. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Murjani grew up speaking English, Hindi and Cantonese, and was educated in the United States and Europe. There's something about the amiable and animated Manoj which hints at a focused, hard worker.



From left: Manoj M Murjani and Taha Bouqdir

“Teas taste different from our gold cups that even wine connoisseurs are raving about”

– Manoj Murjani

“Singapore is a blend of cultures, so we wanted to concoct a tea as diverse as Malay kaya on Western toast.”

– Taha Bouqdir

Murjani moved to Asia more than ten years ago, amid the clout of dot-com era uncertainties, bringing with him his philosophy of “wellness”. He eventually shortened ‘The Wellness Group’ to ‘TWG’, explaining, “because everything has an acronym in Singapore.”

“I’m always thinking about how to make the experience in each of our establishments right,” he admits, “I’m always pushing myself towards perfection.” Words like “perfection” and “excellence” repeatedly surface in his speech. “I am especially motivated when someone says I can’t.”

“I don’t have many interests outside of TWG,” the animated businessman candidly confesses, “our business has so many facets which let me translate and express my various interests.”

“Even right now, I’m composing our next salon playlist in my head,” he jokes, in all seriousness.

TAHA BOUQDIR, TEA AMBASSADOR

Taha Bouqdir feels proud to be the ambassador of 36 nations, from which his hundreds of tea concoctions hail. From the tea leaf containers lining the walls from floor to ceiling, the master of olfactory evocation picks out two tins close to his heart. The romance of Provence bursts forth from Bain de Roses. Opening the lid of Alexandria unleashes the cool musk of the Moroccan mint.

Born in France to Moroccan parents, Bouqdir was raised in both continents and is grateful for the opportunity to draw from the best of both cultures. “Moroccans and the French are surprisingly similar in several ways,” he remarks, “they share a love for a top-notch meal or a satisfying cup of coffee or tea.”

“Bombarded by tea imports from around the world, France’s interest in tea is untamable,” he continues. “I was shocked to learn that, conversely, a lot of people in Asia do not know much about tea.”

“Having spent my life travelling and sampling spices from all corners of the globe, I was inspired to help others travel around the world without leaving their comfy tea salon seats.”

Bouqdir nitpicks about staying consistent and contemporary. “I try to ensure that the expectations of customers of our salons anywhere around the world are met by the same TWG standards.” The mild-tempered, jovial entrepreneur likes to take notice of how the world is moving, seeing his business through the spectrum of fashion. “I have to repackage TWG Tea’s salon interiors and offerings each season, to attract this new generation,” he details, “it is a circle where fashion and other industries mutually inspire one another.”

BLENDING IN

“Our best-seller in Harrods is our Singapore Breakfast Tea,” announces Bouqdir, ordering me a serving, which comes in their recently designed glass tea pot.

TWG does not neurotically safeguard any top secret recipes. “The Singapore Breakfast is a blend of Indian black tea and Chinese green tea,” says Bouqdir. “We customised this tea pot to translate TWG’s transparency, and the fact that the strength of Singapore lies in its transparency and business ethics.” Although one might disagree with parts of Bouqdir’s statement, one cannot fault the flawless texture, strength and undertones of this vanilla-laced blend. “Singapore is a blend of cultures, so we wanted to concoct a tea as diverse as Malay kaya on Western toast.”

“Tea tasting used to be monopolised solely by a certain class of people, but we wish for it to be understood better and enjoyed universally,” Murjani elaborates.

“We built this business so that future generations of men, women and children, rich and poor, fashionistas and conservatives, traditionalists and amateurs, may all enjoy great brews.”

“Did you know that, back in the 1980s in Paris, tea was chiefly a premise for asking someone out on a date? It’s cross-cultural, for different occasions, and for every hour of the day. Tea brings people together, so please don’t just drink it when you are sick.”

As for aspiring tea connoisseurs seeking advice, Murjani lends his wisdom, “don’t be afraid to go for something completely different – let your palette be surprised.”

“The right tea pots and strainers are also essential,” he emphasises. “Teas taste different from our gold cups that even wine connoisseurs are raving about,” talking about the gilded apparatus, which TWG Tea has made available to the average man.

“Providing our patrons with all the necessary facilities, we let them derive their own experiences – each tea is open to personal interpretation.”

“Enquire about each tea and our staff will fill you in on its preparation, and historical and cultural context,” advises Bouqdir. “Manoj and I have come to realise that if you can make your customers think, ‘I’ve learnt something today,’ you just might have won them over for a lifetime.” Tapping on the same myriad of spices which first transformed Singapore into an important trading nexus, these two mad hatters of tea are achieving global domination, one cup at a time. **MF**