

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

SMC grad helps Numi Organic Tea make its global mark



Photo provided

Brian Durkee in Jiangxi, China - the country's largest Fair Trade Tea cooperative.

By Vera Kochan

Most would think working for an organic tea company would be all zen, without much strife. But when Brian Durkee, who was recently promoted to CEO after several years serving as the company's president, traveled around the world on behalf of Oakland-based Numi Organic Tea, it was not without its dangerous moments.

On a trip to Egypt in 2011, Durkee was there working on the chamomile and mint products when a revolution took place. "I wasn't allowed to leave the hotel. I had to grow a beard and wore a scarf around my head. When I traveled, I had to have armed guards with me. If something went wrong there was no infrastructure to get us out of

trouble. It was like something out of an Indiana Jones movie!"

Durkee was also in south/western China near Burma when there was increased insurgent activity with Laos. A similar situation occurred in India near far western Assam.

A proud lifelong tea drinker, Durkee earned his MBA from Saint Mary's College in 2011 and lives in Lamorinda with his wife and two children, ages 8 and 4. "The history of my role at Numi is tasting tea from all over the world - how it differs from India to Africa to Asia."

During his 17-year tenure with Numi, Durkee has traveled to over 35 countries, explaining, "We do it to be connected with the community." Much of that connection

comes from Durkee's efforts to "leave the world a better place than we found it."

Having built a large global network of tea farming contacts since Numi's founding in 1999, the tea company finds itself in an ever-growing humanitarian position. Numi tea is produced in accordance with Fairtrade International's rigorous environmental, economic and social standards, which are independently verified through regular audits by an accredited third-party auditor.

One of Durkee's first projects when he started in 2004 was to develop relationships with key farmers. "It created a platform to go beyond. We pay incrementally for them to also distribute funds to empower the community for things like schools," he said. "We've brought farming partners into the fair trade enterprise and currently have more than 14,000 that work for Numi."

Numi is also a B Corp, meaning they are a certified business that meets the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose. "We're a tea company that tries to do good in the world by using tea as a vehicle for that," Durkee said with pride.

The Numi Foundation sponsors many philanthropic efforts. Numi Curriculum is designed to bring gardening, art and social studies to chil-

dren at Title 1 Oakland Unified elementary schools. Another project, Together for H2OPE, partners with global farming communities to ensure clean and safe water access. The program has helped over 6,000 people by decreasing water-borne illnesses a whopping 90%. The foundation's latest effort, COVID-19 Food Relief, provides free, weekly organic produce deliveries to families in need, having distributed over 350,000 pounds to date.

During the pandemic Numi's retail and e-commerce sales have spiked, but Durkee noted, "A lot of Numi's business is in food service such as restaurants, large offices like Google, colleges and universities, and we are an exclusive tea for United Airlines. We took some big hits last year."

Besides leading the Numi team and driving overall company strategy and culture, Durkee has managed strategic partnerships, financial planning and execution, sales and marketing initiatives, global supply chain developments, and product innovation.

As if not busy enough, Durkee has also taken on duties as an adjunct professor at Oakland's California College of the Arts in the Design Strategy MBA program. His classes focus on innovative design, and he has taught Operations Strategy and Systems since 2013. Durkee has also guest lectured at the University of San Francisco (where he re-

ceived a BS in systems management), SMC and UC Berkeley. He looks forward to the day when campuses will reopen for in-person instruction.

"I love to teach in the classroom," he said. "I'd like to do more of that later in my career."

Numi launches new products every year by using unique ingredients. Next month they plan to offer a "wellness" line of teas containing pure, organic herbs that are proven to work when dealing with topics such as congestion, immunity issues, sore throat and detoxification.

Playing a significant role in several initiatives that Numi is known for, Durkee has led efforts to push the Non-GMO Project to change the company's standard on immersion packaging - which includes tea bags. Prior to that, only tea ingredients were included in the standard, allowing manufacturers of GMO-sourced bioplastic tea bags to claim Non-GMO Verification. The company recently launched its first compostable tea wrapper, thereby achieving Climate Neutral certification.

Durkee is proud to be part of an organization with honorable standards. "How do we continue to lead? You can't be risk averse," he said. "What makes Numi different is their commitment to community."

For more information visit: NumiTea.com.

Healdsburg: A happy hamlet for escape



Hotel Les Mars

Photo courtesy Hotel Les Mars

By Fran Miller

The farmer frequented feed stores that once surrounded Healdsburg's central, tree-shaded plaza have been replaced with wine tasting rooms and charming restaurants, yet the agricultural essence of this tiny Sonoma County town persists. Located at the crux of three world-class wine growing regions - the Russian River and the Alexander and Dry Creek Valleys - the proliferation of tasting rooms and farm-to-table cuisine is apropos.

Added to this vinous and gastronomic scene are quaint boutiques, art galleries, and antique shops that seemingly haven't missed a beat over the past tumultuous year. A vibrancy continues to exist in this happy hamlet, making it an ideal spot in which to seek 24 hours of bucolic refuge.

STAY: Central to the town's appeal is Healdsburg Plaza, flanked by lodging, restaurant, and shopping options. Within steps is the elegant Hotel Les Mars, a Relais & Chateaux hotel featuring 16 comfy rooms furnished with stately French antiques, stone-mantel gas fireplaces, and hand-carved canopy beds enveloped in Versai linens. Cararra marble bathrooms feature hydrotherapy

soaking tubs, Bulgari toiletries, and plush robes. A continental breakfast is included and delivered to your room. From dinner reservations, winery tours, and picnics, the Hotel Les Mars staff has the inside track and will happily help you plan an itinerary. They can also help you surprise your significant other with additional in-room treats, such as a flower arrangement, a plate of cookies, chocolate covered strawberries, or artisan cupcakes from nearby Noble Folk Ice Cream & Pie Bar.

DO: Downtown Healdsburg boasts more than 22 galleries, 50 shops and boutiques, 30 wine tasting rooms, and innumerable eateries, most all continuing to operate safely during these trying times. Yet a trip to this bucolic region is not complete without a proper vineyard wine tasting. A drive down nearby Dry Creek Road offers a plethora of options, and for the lovers of sparkling wines, Amista Vineyards is the way to go. The only sparkling producer within the Dry Creek Valley, Amista, its owner's Mike and Vicky Farrow, and winemaker Ashley Herzberg use the traditional Champagne method in crafting Sparkling Blanc de Blanc, Sparkling Syrah, and

Sparkling Grenache, each made from grapes grown on their estate vineyards. They also make estate-grown Chardonnay, Syrah, Grenache and Tres, a GSM blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvèdre, plus Dry Creek Zinfandel and Rockpile Cabernet Sauvignon made with fruit from their nearby Healdsburg neighbors. Enjoy a tasting on their vast, covered patio that overlooks the vines, or grab a glass and take a 20-minute stroll around the vineyard.

DINE: Plaza-adjacent Dry Creek Kitchen has long been Healdsburg's restaurant 'go-to,' and in spite of increased competition from a plethora of celebrated upstarts, it continues to be the gold standard. Celebrity chef Charlie Palmer's paean to Sonoma County and its bounty of both food and wine, Dry Creek Kitchen is perhaps best known for its wine list. Pages and pages feature only Sonoma County labels, both the well-known and the more obscure. Management here enjoys close relationships with local producers, affording the restaurant, and its customers, access to brands not easily found.

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