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SMC grad helps Numi Organic Tea make its global mark

By Vera Kochan



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

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 children 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 received 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.

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