

TEA TOTALERS

For everyone from grandmas to hipsters BY SHANNON FINNELL

Josh Chamberlain waves his cocktail shaker vigorously. “It’s really important to get a good shake,” he says. “It gives it some froth.” The intoxicating beverage he’s mixing up isn’t alcohol, it’s iced tea, “the emerald,” to be precise. It’s the iced tea that Chamberlain recommends to new customers, so they can start off with a distinct and refreshing drink. It’s so refreshing, in fact, that it leaves the drinker with a clean just-brushed-your-teeth feeling, despite being green tea without a bit of mint.

Chamberlain’s tea house, J-Tea, has been importing and selling carefully selected tea from Taiwan and China since 2005, when he returned from six years of living and studying in Taiwan. He says the relationship between Taiwan’s food culture and socializing drew him to the tea business. “The tea allows people to connect,” Chamberlain says. “People didn’t know what to talk to me about, but if we sit together for five minutes and talk about tea ...” he trails off as he pours a cold one.

J-Tea’s iced tea list is short and sweet, but it probably won’t be for long. Chamberlain started serving iced tea at the shop for the first time this summer, and his iced tea goals are already ambitious. “I want to have 20 unique, awesome ice teas,” he says. “There’s no reason to put it on the list just because you can put it over water.” His green raspberry and raspberry rooibos iced teas include local raspberries cooked down to concentrate.

In addition to the iced teas in the shop, Chamberlain has plans to expand with a bike food cart that will be able to “go where the people are” and sell iced tea from a bumper bar. He says he also sells a lot of “Eugene breakfast,” which he also provides as the house black tea at Supreme Bean.

Kateseen Gill loves tea for its social culture as well, but her tea education took place while she was growing up in Seychelles, a nation of islands north of Madagascar. She didn’t go into business until 1995, though, when she and her daughter were living in Eugene. She started with \$30 of merchandise, and quickly learned about imports, packing, shows and sales. She says she immediately learned that quality tea was the only way her loose-tea business would survive, and now, “once they taste the product, they drop the teabag!”

Tea Lady Teas has grown to 150 blends, largely from customer requests that proved popular. They line the walls at the shop she opened in 2009, with sample tins below the boxes encouraging browsers to sniff the teas. Gill says that friends often ask her what it’s been like opening a business in a recession. “My life has been a recession!” she says, laughing. “I’ve been playing it tight to the chest for years!”

Techi-tea, a vanilla and black tea blend, is one of Gill’s best sellers, but she also recommends the sereni-tea — for grown-ups and kids. She created the hibiscus, mint and orange blend when her daughter wanted Kool-Aid as a child, and Gill was determined not to give in to the sugary drink.

Gill’s hard-won success inspired her to look for other women, especially single moms, to do business with. She imports some of her teas from woman growers in Kenya

and Madagascar, and she’s hoping to work with a woman she met on vacation in Mexico to obtain some hibiscus varieties.

Locally, Gill’s sales are weathering the recession without a problem, and for those who drop by her Willamette Street shop, she just might disappear behind her *Wizard of Oz*-like curtain to brew a pot of tea. ■

J-Tea International, 2778 Friendly St., 285-8997.
Tea Lady Teas, 1502 Willamette St., 302-9778.



JOSH CHAMBERLAIN TENDS TO HIS TEA BAR AT J-TEA

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

IZAKAYA MEIJI COMPANY



Boozeweek Cocktail Hour
Every Tuesday from 5-9 pm
With Elliot Martinez
Featuring Our
Housemade Shrubs

**ALWAYS
OPEN LATE**
4pm-1am nightly

Whiskey Bar · Japanese Small Plates · Desserts

345 VAN BUREN · 541-505-8804 · izakayameiji.com

★★★ 525 HIGH STREET, EUGENE ★ (541) 683-1999 ★★★

IT'S A SOUP-CENTRIC UNIVERSE...



AND YOU'RE INVITED.

Over 80 Varieties of Original Soups!
Vegan, Vegetarian, Gluten-Free & Omnivore Options
Gourmet Sandwiches ~ Custom Salads ~ Scrumptious Baked Goods
Full Espresso Bar ~ Frozen Soup To-Go

★★★ See Our Daily Soup Menu on Facebook Like ★★★