



DARJEELING UNLIMITED

By Sara Frandina

Niraj Lama isn't new to the practice of purveying tea. Despite his family's company, Happy Earth Tea, finding its roots in Rochester somewhat recently in 2011, tea has been an integral part of Lama's life since the beginning. He was born and raised in the Darjeeling region of India, which is world renowned for its high-quality black teas and prominent tea gardens.

"Tea is a drink not just for your body, but for your mind. In Darjeeling, tea is like a beverage bond that links everybody," he says. "Our motive is to share the peace, the happiness, and the joy that comes from tea by bringing quality, fresh teas to our area." As the second most widely consumed beverage in the world, tea originates from southeast Asia, where its two main purposes were quite different from today's: the leaves were either chewed like tobacco or used in cooking.

The Darjeeling region owes its beginnings to Robert Fortune, a Scottish adventurer and botanist who smuggled tea seeds from China to India nearly 200 years ago. That allowed plenty of time for the seeds to sow before Lama would start his first company, the Darjeeling Tea Exclusive, seven years ago. At the time, Lama was newly married to Mary Boland, an American whom he met while she was traveling in India. It was Boland who brought Lama and his love of tea

to the Rochester area, where he immediately fell in love with the both the area and the people.

I first met Lama at the Rochester Public Market last spring, where he is a regular vendor. At the time, he was showcasing a few of his teas such as the "Happy Breakfast Blend" and "Happy Tummy Tea"—lighthearted names for complex products.

"The names are appropriate because in coming from India to the United States, we feel we belong to the world," explains Lama. "We hope to bring these two distinct places together through tea."

Lama continues to achieve this goal by expanding Happy Earth's portfolio, sourcing not only from Darjeeling but also from areas of Taiwan and Japan, and soon from Nepal and Thailand. He doesn't source from just anyone: all but two of the thirty-five teas he sells are grown on organic farms.

"Having lived in a developing world, I've seen the ravages of ignorance when it comes to the use of chemicals in agriculture and the impact it has on both the tea and the people," says Lama. "So for us, organic sourcing isn't a question, it's acknowledgement of sound agricultural practices." ⁽⁵⁸⁵⁾

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Three tips for brewing happy tea:

1. Know the tea

Depending on the size of the leaves, a different amount of tea will be needed. Before brewing, inspect it. Tender tea leaves make the best cups, and the aroma will express quality.

2. Know your tea equipment

How big is the pot in which you're preparing the water? Accuracy is important in brewing perfect tea.

3. Know the rules

Depending on the type of tea and the leaves, both water temperature and steeping time will change. Pay attention to instructions supplied on the packaging.



In late 2013, Lama had the opportunity to visit Dootheria tea estate in Darjeeling.

