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Unravelling the Genetics of Coffee

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Tea Studio is a Pioneering Premium Tea Factory in South India's Nilgiri Mountains

Empowering his daughter as boss of the Tea Studio, Indi Khanna enshrines decades of knowledge in tea manufacturing and marketing within a fully innovative concept focused on unique custom-made boutique teas.

This unheard-of manufacturing approach was developed in response to a precise challenge: how to introduce new options for the slowly declining local tea economy. After years of booming sales at good prices to the Soviet Union in the 1980s, which had attracted many more small tea growers, the recent decade had seen prices drop, quality and volume go down and more and more tea bushes being replaced by other crops.

Founder and CEO of Tea 'n Teas, established in Tamil Nadu, India, Indi Khanna's vision is to bring new incentives to revive tea production in the Nilgiri area, located high up in South India's Nilgiri mountains. His ultimate goal is to achieve rewarding price levels through improved quality, by training the tea smallholders, developing a new range of premium teas, and attracting new customers. The opening of the Tea Studio in August 2017 was a major step towards reaching the overall goal.

With its striking skyline of an eye catching deep red steel and glass structure rising amidst the lush tropical vegetation high up in the Nilgiri mountain area near the town of Coonoor, the Tea Studio attracts a lot of attention: firstly, from the local population, then the Indian Tea Board officials and market operators, and finally, the target audience, Western tea lovers.

The high tech and spotlessly clean small factory hall displays custom made tea-making machinery for the processing of small batches of top-grade fresh leaf into boutique specialty teas. Located high up at an altitude of 6,070 feet (1,850 meters) in the heart of the tea country, the Tea Studio is surrounded by the tribal lands of the Bagda community, who live scattered over some 400 small villages. These rural households all grow small plots of tea

bushes on their properties, which they pick all year round, delivering the harvests daily to the bought leaf and tea estate factories.

From inception, the Tea Studio's raw material demand was focused on premium fresh leaf quality. Therefore, the starting point was to train some of the village women to follow stringent rules for picking according to specific requirements for bud and leaf size. After an unusual and slightly uncomfortable start, the pickers readily absorbed and implemented the tea training.

Over the past two years this new style has not only made them proud of their skills but has also generated much higher income, with prices up to ten times more than those paid for standard baskets. Hence, a significant increase in added value as well as a global improvement through social recognition for these small households.

Furthermore, the leaf supply from the remote rural surroundings is naturally organic because the farming communities never had access to industrial plant protection and fertilizing products, growing their crops in a traditional way, using compost and cow dung. This allows the Tea Studio to claim that its teas are naturally organic.

When Muskan Khanna returned to India with her university degree in media studies from the United Kingdom, she worked in advertising in Mumbai. When her father's project became a business reality, he invited her to join the business, and she agreed with the notion of having her own creative say and managing the factory by herself with an all female team.

Now running smoothly, the tea portfolio has increased to include 16 different custom-made specialty teas. New customers such as the Camellia Sinensis Tea Company in Montréal, Canada, one of the Tea Studio business partners, have joined the ranks and new projects are on the table.

On the sourcing side new tea varieties will be planted to provide additional flavour and processing options in the coming years. There



Images courtesy of Barbara Dufrêne



Unusual in tea manufacturing, Tea Studio is run by a woman with an all female team.

are also plans to widen the access of the local growers to better husbandry and plucking techniques, to organise tea travel and tea teaching for passionate consumers on the premises.

Although unusual to appoint a female factory manager who operates with an all ladies team, the combination is proving successful. An important aspect is linked to the company's deep involvement with social responsibility, geared towards better education of the local village people and in particular, the schooling of girls. These efforts have already been recognised officially when Muskan Khanna was given the Indian Business Women Award 2019 and nominated as Woman Innovator of the Year for the Nilgiri Bamboo specialty tea (patent pending).

The Covid-19 pandemic struck badly, particularly by hampering exports, but the Tea Studio is a great demonstration of a vision becoming reality. Here all the lines come together – knowledge and competence, community support, innovation, creative energy, and the deep desire to share, which have opened paths towards potentially reviving the local tea economy.

The Tea Studio premium tea factory is located high up (1,850 meters) in the Nilgiri mountains, surrounded by tribal lands.

Barbara Dufrêne