

20 August 2008

Family Business Imports Tea from Asia and Africa
Company built its reputation on quality and social and ecological responsibility



Ahmed and Reem Rahim started Numi Organic Tea in part to satisfy their own craving for dried-lime tea. (Numi)

By Burton Bollag
Special Correspondent

Washington -- The decision by a brother and sister to import from Oman the dried-lime tea their Iraqi immigrant family drank has blossomed into a large specialty tea business.

Numi Organic Tea has prospered by introducing consumers to natural flavors from around the world. Numi means "citrus" in the founders' Arabic mother tongue and refers to the dried-lime tea that was the company's first product. Strictly speaking, dried lime, rooibos, honeybush and a number of other Numi varieties are not teas at all, but herbal infusions, known also as

tisanes.

The brand has won market share by stressing commitment to two issues of growing importance to consumers: organic, environmentally sustainable agriculture and better conditions for the workers who harvest and process the tea.

The company, Numi LLC, based in Oakland, California, did \$12.5 million of business last year, according to Ahmed Rahim, 40, its chief executive. After sales growth of around 50 percent per year in recent years, he expects sales to reach nearly \$17 million in 2008.

He and his sister, Reem Rahim, 42, started the business from Reem's small Oakland apartment in 1999. The siblings brought their multicultural histories to the enterprise.

The Rahim family left Baghdad and came to America when Ahmed and Reem were small children. They grew up in Cleveland, where their father practiced medicine.

After college, Ahmed spent 10 years in Europe, first as a photographer and sometime-musician based in Paris, then in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. There, amid the large community of young Americans who arrived after the 1989 fall of communism, he helped design several tea houses, becoming part owner of three of them. In the process, Ahmed learned the subtleties of the world's most popular drink after water.

Reem worked as a biomedical engineer before spending time in Italy in pursuit of an artistic career. She relies on both experiences to design Numi's packaging.

Part of Numi Organic Tea's appeal is its "purist" approach. It uses only whole tea leaves, herbs and dried fruits in its teas, shunning even natural flavorings and oils.

Numi has popularized new varieties, like "flowering tea" -- hand-sewn balls of tea leaves that open like flowers when steeped in boiling water. The company also introduced what it describes as a new, chemical-free decaffeination method, using carbon dioxide. These innovations and new flavors are "how we got so popular so fast," Ahmed said.

The enterprise also came along at a good time. Total sales of tea and tisanes in the United States have increased almost fourfold in the past two decades, from \$1.84 billion in 1990 to \$6.85 billion in 2007, according to the Tea Association of the U.S.A. Sales of specialty teas, like those sold by Numi, grew by a similar proportion, from \$0.27 billion to \$1.1 billion.

Numi obtains its products from gardens and farms around the world. Green, white, puerh (fermented tea), and flowering teas come from China, its biggest supplier. Black teas come from India and Sri Lanka. Herbal ingredients come from Africa: mint from Morocco, chamomile from Egypt, and the popular rooibos ("red bush" in Afrikaans) and honeybush from South Africa.

Ahmed said 97 percent of Numi's products are certified organically grown, without chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

In addition, the majority of its products bear the Fair Trade Certified label, issued by the nonprofit TransFair USA, which monitors farms and factories producing tea, coffee, cocoa and a few other commodities to make sure they are free of child labor and other abuses and to ensure decent working conditions. A percentage of each Fair Trade Certified purchase is returned to workers' cooperatives to fund community development projects, in areas like health care or education.

Like other fair trade importers, Numi says it seeks to build long-term relationships with suppliers and does its own monitoring to ensure that farms and workshops treat workers well and practice sustainable, organic agriculture. Ahmed said workers who harvest and process Numi's teas earn two to three times the amount earned by other workers.

In 2007, Numi became the first company in a pilot project for an alternate system to ensure workers' rights, the Fair Labor Practices and Community Benefits certification. The new system is being developed by the Scientific Certification Systems company, which in 2005 introduced the widely used VeriFlora standards that certify cut flowers are produced in an "environmentally and socially responsible"

way.

Some commentators criticize fair trade for inducing more farmers to grow coffee, tea or other crops to sell at higher prices to fair-trade buyers, thereby leading to overproduction and falling prices. But John C. Edmunds, a professor of finance at Babson College in Massachusetts, said what the critics miss is that fair trade creates a new market. A small but growing number of people in the wealthy countries, he said, is willing to pay a premium price for commodities produced in a more socially and environmentally responsible way. "Fair trade is helping a lot of [small farmers and workers] and bringing a better quality product to educated consumers," he said.

Numi hopes that a commitment to social and ecological responsibility, combined with a close attention to its teas, will lead to continued growth of its business.

[Tell us what you think about this article.](#)


Bookmark with:

 [Delicious](#)

 [Digg](#)

 [reddit](#)

 [Facebook](#)

 [StumbleUpon](#)

[What's this?](#)

This site delivers information about current U.S. foreign policy and about American life and culture. It is produced by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.