



A chance Parisian encounter led Manoj Murjani and Taha Bouqdib to realise an Asian luxury tea empire with TWG Tea.

Accessories sold at the salon allow regulars to recreate the calming ritual in style at home.



# TOASTING TEA

In Kuala Lumpur to launch Malaysia's first TWG Tea Salon, President Taha Bouqdib and CEO Manoj Murjani share the story of their brand, born of a mutual passion for exquisite teas.

Text **Petrina Jo Fernandez** Photography **Patrick Chan & TWG**

Perched above a canal on the graceful curve of a bridge, wrapped in a sleek embrace of dark wood and glass, is the infinitely-elegant TWG Tea Salon, one of two outlets at The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands Singapore. First-time visitors to the luxury shopping destination inevitably find themselves entranced by its whimsicality as they glide through the waterway below on bona fide *sampans* and, though the moment is fleeting, the snapshot of the intimate retreat remains long after. The glimpse they catch is but superficial – the magic of TWG Tea is protected within, a fantasy of mahogany

The salon reinterprets macarons in unique tea-infused flavours in an art termed 'tea gastronomy.'

and gilded gold, replete with massive artisanal canisters of tea and fanciful arrays of delectable desserts.

Fans across the causeway in Malaysia previously thought nothing of zipping down to replenish their stashes of exquisite harvests and exclusive hand-crafted blends, but these excursions are now, thankfully, rendered unnecessary after the recent launch of TWG Tea in Pavilion Kuala Lumpur. President Taha Bouqdib and CEO Manoj Murjani handpicked the venue four years ago, their instincts verified by the steady stream of traffic the flagship salon enjoys.

"Look around and you immediately notice the diversity of our patrons," says Bouqdib, signalling with his eyes the trendily-dressed yuppies, animated table of senior citizens and young families scattered around the café. "We strived to create an inviting atmosphere of relaxed indulgence and the classicity of our décor transcends demographics."

That Bouqdib and Murjani are here together today is something of a miracle for the pair. An encounter eight years ago, seemingly orchestrated by the hands of Destiny, introduced the spiffy Managing Director of apparel empire Murjani Group – his grandfather launched Gloria Vanderbilt's sculpted jeans for women in the 1970s – to Bouqdib, who was then managing renowned French teahouse Mariage Frères. The two instantly built a rapport ("We're the same age, have kids the same age and grew up outside our countries of origin," says Murjani) and discovered a shared passion for tea. Conversation turned to vision and conviction, and the two set out to realise a new concept for one of the world's oldest drinks.

With 17 years of luxury tea industry experience to his name, Bouqdib paid Singapore a two-day visit at Murjani's invitation, and he and wife Maranda Barnes, Director of Business Development and Communications, immediately fell in love with the city. The partners decided to base the company there in tribute to its history as a significant tea trading port, with the year 1837 emblazoned in its logo to commemorate the birth of the island's tea trade. "Singapore is a small island but it is a representation of Asia and where the region is going today," says Bouqdib. "Western brands have been buying teas from Asia to repackage and sell them back to Asia at inflated prices for decades; we decided to reverse that process and give Asia the credit it is due in the tea stakes by recognising its regional origins. Singapore doesn't have claim to home-grown teas of its own but it is a point of convergence."





TWG is short for “The Wellness Group” and the CEO describes the company as tea’s answer to fashion’s Louis Vuitton. “We distinguish ourselves by the luxury of our selections; you can find lovely treasures at entry level prices but you could also leave with something scrumptiously luxe and extremely exclusive.”

Gentle hints of this philosophy lie within the cafés themselves, with intention motivating every detail, from the burnished teapots to the carefully-curated menu. The former are not your ordinary fine bone china accessories, but highly-insulated vessels coated in contemporary cloaks indicative of the outlet’s location: gold to replicate the patina of high living in luxury retail spaces and silver as a clever manifestation of glass-and-chrome financial districts. Their reflective sheen throws the surrounding ambiance back to the customer, “so one is always conscious he or she is in TWG,” expounds Murjani. Hand-blown glass, porcelain and cast-iron teapots are also available for purchase, cementing TWG’s position as a brand that encompasses an entire lifestyle of fine tea appreciation.

Talk of teas turns the conversation to the wide-ranging varieties on offer. “Tea has been around for centuries but no one has done it quite the way we have,” notes Murjani. “We have over 800 varieties in our global archive and 450 are offered at the Pavilion outlet. We are committed to offering teas directly from source gardens and have obtained the finest leaves from over 36 countries, including selections from Mozambique, Papua New Guinea and Burma, as well as limited Da Hong Pao leaves from Fujian’s Wuyi mountains



#### ABOVE

The polished interiors of Pavilion Kuala Lumpur’s TWG Tea Salon tempts passersby with the promise of an indulgent sensorial experience.

#### BELOW

Insulated teapots in contemporary shades move tea drinking from its heritage-steeped image to a contemporary indulgence.

in China.” The sheer extent of the menu may intimidate but friendly staff are on hand to sort the blacks from the greens and reds, pointing out must-try limited editions or seasonal blends. Complement a pot with a tea-infused savoury or sweet medley, too: recommendations include the Wagyu Burger accompanied by 1837 Green Tea vinaigrette and the vibrant tea-flavoured macarons for which TWG is particularly famed.

Step through the glass entrance of the Pavilion salon and you are instantly enveloped in a sense of serenity, as though the mere act of crossing the threshold transports you to a haven of psychological well-being. There is something soothing about the eternity of tea – it has been here long before us and will remain here long after us. In this juxtaposition of antiques with contemporary elements of wood, glass and marble, you insentiently absorb the confluence of eras, a visual reflection of the timelessness of the drink once so revered and rare that it was exclusive to the pleasure of Chinese emperors. Its nobility now lies in its egalitarianism, parcelled in cheery, contemporary collections of loose leaves and packaged teas, with dreamy names such as Silver Moon, Moroccan Mint and the Egyptian vanilla-mint-and-carthame-flower Alexandria blend.

Beautiful for its dynamism and the synergy between the like-minded partners, TWG Tea is strategically positioned to expand as a global brand with established presences in Japan, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. Outside TWG Tea boutiques, counters and cafes, the ubiquitous yellow sachets are served on international flights and in five-star hotels, its repute steadily growing as neophytes form an affinity for the brand’s consistency and quality. “It’s a living, breathing and versatile brand,” says Bouqdib. “We are not selling tea; we’re selling an experience and it’s hard to put a price on that.” And, as you glide by the hardwood tea counters and brass weighing scales, the weight of the world melting off your shoulders as you inhale the air spiced with perfumed leaves resting in elegant samovars, you have little choice but to agree. **12**

