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APRIL 2009

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TEA BUDS

LEAFY GREEN
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BLACK



Storm in a teacup

Manoj Murjani, Chairman,
The Wellness Group

The travel issue

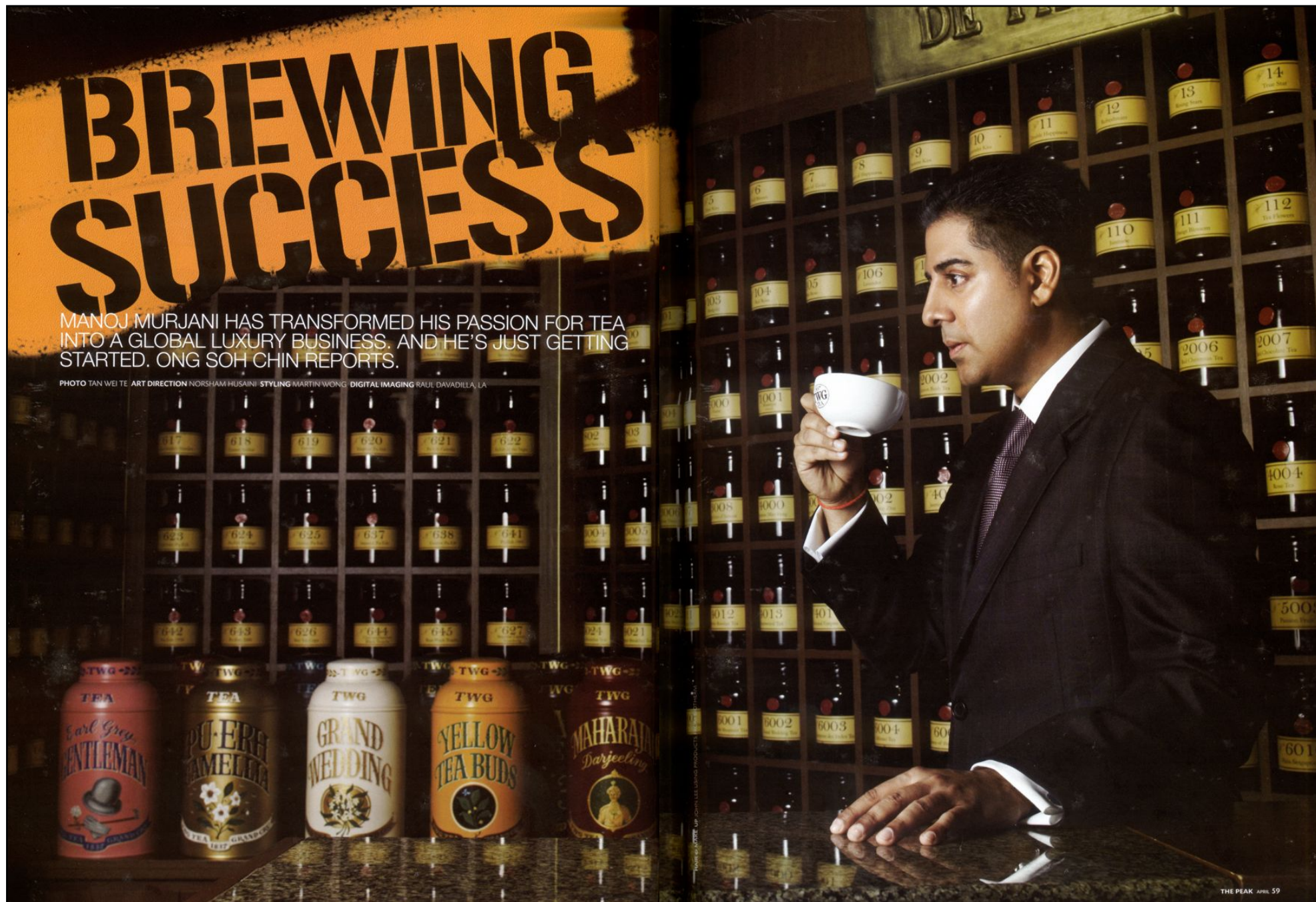
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BREWING SUCCESS

MANOJ MURJANI HAS TRANSFORMED HIS PASSION FOR TEA INTO A GLOBAL LUXURY BUSINESS. AND HE'S JUST GETTING STARTED. ONG SOH CHIN REPORTS.

PHOTO TAN WEI TE ART DIRECTION NORSHAM HUSAINI STYLING MARTIN WONG DIGITAL IMAGING RAUL DAVADILLA, LA





Some people, they say, are born with a silver spoon in their mouths. In the case of Manoj Murjani, however, you would say he was born with a gold teacup at his lips.

The Hong Kong-born entrepreneur, born into a wealthy family that created Gloria Vanderbilt Jeans in the 1970s, is the chairman of The Wellness Group and co-founder of its first subsidiary, TWG Tea, a Singaporean-based company which wants nothing less than world domination over the hallowed domain of luxury tea purveyors.

Says Murjani, who moved to Singapore in 2003: "We don't want to sell tea as you know it. Instead, we want to create a world of tea that is innovative and of the moment, while learning from the old masters and respecting the old traditions."

While he acknowledges that there is a place for the grand Western tea houses of the past, with their lofty heritage, TWG Tea wants to re-establish and re-brand Asia as the birthplace of tea and refine tea appreciation, with unique blends and new approaches to its consumption.

And it certainly isn't doing so in small measures.

Take that gold teacup, for example. You can actually buy one, or even a platinum version at the TWG Tea Salon & Boutique at Republic Plaza, an elegant, wood-panelled oasis of calm in the hustle and bustle of Singapore's business district. The salon, which features a rotating selection of 300 teas at any one time, also serves a selection of exquisite tea-infused pastries and macaroons.

According to Murjani, 40, a precious metal like gold does not degrade the flavour of the tea and, therefore, offers up to the drinker



the purest essence of the leaves. A side note to those who also love their wines – drinking Bacchus' finest from a gold cup affords the same unadulterated benefits. And if that isn't enough heavy metal for the gilded palate, TWG Tea also offers blends, like Amour De The, which have actual gold leaves inside.

Its most expensive tea is its Yellow Gold Tea that is harvested only on one day in the year – divined by a tea master – in Sichuan, China. The limited harvest, as well as its sublime taste, justifies its hefty price tag. TWG's version has flecks of 24K gold inside and costs \$300 per 100g.

The keyword, therefore, is quality. TWG Tea only uses the best leaves from the best gardens, with the best ingredients, says Murjani. Its Chocolate Tea contains morsels of Valrhona chocolate. Bain de Rose, an exquisite



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rose tea, contains only the best blooms from Grasse, a region in France famous for its perfume industry. All the teas, which are also served in high end hotels like the St Regis, The Fullerton and The Four Seasons, contain no preservatives and are stored in exquisite containers that have double lids. All packaging is designed in Paris.

The company, which started in 2007 with 600 teas, now has 700, including a whopping 15 Earl Grey blends alone, as well as intriguing concoctions like Sexy Tea, a lemongrass-based blend which, according to Murjani, makes you feel sensual. These blends are created in the company's blending facility and central kitchen at McPherson.

Watching *Sex and The City* on a flight to New York was the inspiration behind this particular blend. "I thought it would be great if we could create a tea inspired by this. So when I came back, I discussed the idea with Taha and he worked his magic to put that special moment, that inspiration, into a blend. The whole process took a couple of days," shares Murjani.

Taha is Taha Bouqdib, the president of TWG Tea, Murjani's business partner and close friend – they and their families hang out on weekends and go on holidays together. He is a connoisseur of tea who has had 15

years' experience as a tea innovator, most of which was spent at the world-famous French tea institution, Mariage Freres.

The two men enjoy an uncanny, symbiotic relationship, says Murjani. "We both share in the creative process. However, if a distinction were to be made, I am more the businessperson and he, the tea knowledge person. Taha's gift is being able to translate an idea into a blend. I approach things from the other side: I identify a market or niche we need to be in and I will make the calls and make it happen. People say we are like twins. Our dynamics are interchangeable, even though we have different responsibilities."

Murjani, who has enjoyed his favourite beverage since he was a child, says tea is all about cultivating relationships. The founding of TWG Tea was a journey of discovery, he says,

Murjani wants to give customers affordable luxury and true value for their money.



"AFTER THE PARTITION, MY PATERNAL GRANDFATHER WENT TO HONG KONG, AND MY MATERNAL GRANDFATHER TO LONDON. SO WHEN I CAME TO SINGAPORE, I EXPERIENCED, FOR THE FIRST TIME, A COUNTRY THAT CONTAINED ALL THE FACETS OF ME."

signposted by serendipity. Only after four years of visiting plantations and building partnerships with their owners, did he finally decide that he was ready to launch. But they were years well spent.

It was on this long journey that he met Bouqdib, purely by chance, at the Mariage Freres salon in the Marais region of Paris. "He was rarely at the store, but he happened to be there the day my wife and I were there," recalls Murjani. The two hit it off almost instantly and the rest, as one would say, is history.

It was another journey of chance that brought him to Singapore and eventually made him stay here. "I came here in 1991 for business and I met my wife here," he says. The couple have three children — two sons, aged 10 and seven; and a daughter who is five and a half.

Says the Singapore permanent resident, who grew up in Hong Kong and attended schools in Britain and the United States: "I have always felt very welcomed in Singapore. One of the hardest questions I had to answer as a child was, 'Where are you from?'"

"Where I am from in India doesn't exist anymore. It disappeared with the Partition. I'm from Sindh which is today in Pakistan. When the Partition happened, my grandfather on my father's side went to Hong Kong and, from my mother's, to London. So when I came to Singapore, I experienced, for the first time, a country that contained all the facets of me."

Today, he serves on the board of the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) and was recently a member of the board of the Sentosa Development Corporation.

From a business standpoint, Singapore also makes sense, he says, because it is in the heart of Asia where the finest tea-growing nations of India, Sri Lanka, Japan and China are. "These are all big tea producing countries and they protect their teas which sometimes makes it difficult to import the leaves. But, with Singapore not being a tea-growing nation, there is no such issue. They give and trust us with their finest leaves and here in Singapore, we combine all these very special teas from each of these countries, together with spices and flowers from Europe and the Middle East to create very unique blends."

While he acknowledges that the current economic climate has made him and his partners — apart from Bouqdib, they are director Maranda Barnes, managing director Rith Aum-Stievenard and executive chef Philippe Langlois — a bit more cautious, they are prepared to pump in more than the \$8 million they have already invested in the business.

"Things really haven't changed that much because we are all about balance. We didn't open with 20 shops, for example. But we are aware of

what's happening, so we make sure we give customers affordable luxury and true value for their money."

Expansion plans are already on track, in Singapore and beyond. From January, TWG Tea became available at Dean & DeLuca stores in the United States. And the company plans to go into more retail outlets, as well as more hotels, here and around the world.

There are also plans to open another two tea salons in Singapore — including one on Orchard Road — and eventually in Europe and the United States, either through direct investment or franchise arrangements.

"We currently have 80 employees in Singapore. By July, we plan to have 100. We now have 700 teas. By the end of next year, we intend to have a collection of over 1,000," says Murjani.

When asked when he expects the company to break even, Murjani replies that the main impetus is not money. "The goal is never only financial but to do what we do well, be the best at it and not to compromise on value. That is the essence of TWG Tea. I believe that once those basics are respected, the success will soon follow." ☪

ALL IN THE FAMILY

The Murjani Group, founded in 1930 by Manoj's grand father B K Murjani is an apparel production and brand development business. Apart from Gloria Vanderbilt, it also launched Tommy Hilfiger in the 80s. Focusing on India in recent years, it holds Indian rights for Gucci, Jimmy Choo, Bottega Veneta, Calvin Klein, French Connection and Tumi.

The Wellness Group (TWG), positioned to be a global leader in the emerging and fast growing wellness industry was founded by Manoj Murjani in late 2003. TWG has since then, built an empire of quality and innovative products and brands on the leading edge of the current wellness movement.