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**THE MISSION OF THE TEA LOVERS FESTIVAL IS
TO PROMOTE THE LOVE OF TEA THROUGH EDUCATION
AND DIVERSE CULTURAL EXPERIENCES.**

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INTRODUCTION

First, I'd like to set the record straight—my passion is not tea. I love tea, but I actually drink more coffee than tea. Of course, I've learned a tremendous amount about tea, as I've been running the Tea Lovers Festival for a decade, but I don't consider myself a tea expert or a tea connoisseur—I'm surrounded by such experts and my knowledge doesn't even come close to theirs. My passion is actually culture and community.

It all started back in 2001, when my oldest "niece" Rosa was about two years old. Yes, the quotation marks are there for a reason, but that's another story in another book called *Tapestry Tales*. I was an "American" living in Amsterdam at the time. Here I go again—yet another word surrounded by quotes, as I'm an American by passport only, while in actuality I'm a European mutt from "the Old Country," as I often call it. So more stories, better left for another time, and perhaps yet another book. But back to tea and the story of the festival.

The Netherlands doesn't really celebrate Valentine's Day and since part of my name has the word 'lov' in it, I wanted to introduce

this festive American holiday to Rosa. We all know how little girls love tea parties, so I created one for her, and in 2001, she and her mother were the only ones attending. Over the next few years, as I got more "nieces" (and "nephews"), these tea parties grew and became a small annual gathering that everyone close to me really enjoyed.

However, in 2004, I found myself living in Los Angeles. I missed my "nieces and nephews" and our Valentine's tea parties, so I decided to continue doing them on my own and thus bring the loving spirit from Holland, at least for a day, to surround me in my newly chosen city.

My work (and living) studio space is rather small, so I rented a modern yoga gallery, just down the street from me in Santa Monica. I put the word out to my local friends and colleagues for this Valentine's tea party and about sixty of them showed up. I didn't even realize that I knew so many people in such a short time of living in the Los Angeles area. And I was thrilled that so many of them attended, thinking that I would probably get some return invitations. Of course, I wasn't



2001

Kulov creates a **VALENTINE'S TEA PARTY** for his nieces in Amsterdam, which becomes an annual event.

2004-05

After moving to Los Angeles, Kulov continues the annual tea parties as private events for friends and clients.

2006

The very first festival opens to the public in Santa Monica and celebrates teas and flavors of **INDIA**.

2007-09

The festival moves to the **Electric Lodge** in Venice and continues to celebrate cultures with strong tea traditions: **JAPAN** in 2007, **CHINA** in 2008 and **ENGLAND** in 2009.

2009

The festival creates the first **TEA LOVERS BUS TOURS** (of Los Angeles), as part of the program for the Fowler Museum's exhibition *Steeped in History: The Art of Tea*.

2010

The newly-transformed festival moves its dates from February to May and its location to **Royal/T** in Culver City. It introduces a new format consisting of a **TEA LOVERS MARKETPLACE** and an **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM**. Theme of **WORLD FLAVORS** is a retrospective celebration of the festival's previous four years.

2010

The **TEA LOVERS BUS TOUR** in the fall of that year explores Ojai, California.

2011

The festival expands into a three-day event and experiences its highest attendance to date. The **TEA LOVERS BUS TOURS**, in the fall of the same year, explore tea culture in San Francisco and the Bay Area.

2012

The festival expands its programming throughout the full month of May, thus allowing it to produce bigger educational projects such as **BATTLE OF THE BAKERS**.

2015

The festival kicks off its **10TH ANNIVERSARY YEAR** with a three-day festival at both **The Armory** and **Stats** in Pasadena.

2013

The festival moves its base, and thus most of its major programs, to the **Armory Center for the Arts** in Pasadena.

2016

As a thank-you to the community for its support over the years, the festival creates a **10TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION** on February 14th, at the **Fowler Museum at UCLA**, featuring music and dance from cultures with strong tea traditions.

2014

The **TEA LOVERS BUS TOUR** to San Diego becomes the main focus of this year's festival instead of the **Tea Lovers Marketplace**.

expecting people to invite me to some elaborate, catered event like the one I had just organized, but a private dinner or a movie invitation would have been nice. However, no such invitations followed.

Los Angeles has some unusual social courtesy dynamics, or perhaps a lack thereof. It's not really a criticism, but a mere observation—certain things are what they are—and maybe wishful thinking on my part that it was different, even after more than a dozen years of living in the city. In general, people here rarely initiate social interactions. Perhaps it's our super-busy lives, or the effort one has to make in covering long distances just to get to places, that create a kind of complacency when it comes to initiating “getting together.” At least, that's been my experience. And as I was still learning about it at the time, thinking it's probably just a fluke, I organized the same event the following year. Of course, the same friends and colleagues showed up and no return invitations followed.

Since I loved organizing these tea parties, as well as had a lot of PR and marketing experience in working with not-for-profit cultural organizations over the years, my solution in continuing the tradition was to open them to the public. This way I could charge everyone, including those same friends and colleagues, to come to the events, and then donate the proceeds to a worthy organization. And that's how the

very first public tea event in 2006 came about. It was at the same space as the two previous private tea parties and it celebrated teas and flavors of India—with dance, music, henna painting, tarot card readings and of course... tea. The latter was represented by a single tea company, Zhena's Gypsy Tea. I had found their packaging in the local health food store and I really liked it, which inspired me to contact them. The founder of the company, Zhena Muzyka, became a fixture at every one of our festivals over the next ten years, either as an exhibitor or as an educator (or both), and was even the focus of one of our Tea Lovers Bus Tours.

This very first public tea event wasn't even big enough to be called a “festival.” But the small space was packed with around eighty people and had a true community feel to it, which I tried to retain over the years as the festival grew. In fact, some of the comments from the attendees that year were “we wish L.A. was always like this.” Proceeds were donated to the local International Humanities Center.

The following year, I moved the festival to a larger space—the Electric Lodge Performing and Visual Arts Center in Venice, which more than doubled the festival's attendance and became our base through 2009. During these few years, the *Annual Valentine's Tea Festival*, as it was then called, continued the theme of celebrating cultures with strong tea traditions, such as Japan in 2007, China

in 2008 and England in 2009. The latter is also known as the “Alice in Wonderland festival” by its main cultural attraction, which helped increase our audience to over 350 attendees.

By the middle of 2009, I felt that this format of the festival—a community cultural event which revolved around tea—had run its course. We had covered enough cultures with strong tea traditions, so I thought we'd have one last retrospective festival, then call it quits. But that year I became acquainted with some other events which would change the course of my thinking.

First, in the summer of 2009, I attended *World Tea Expo*, a trade show for the tea industry held in Las Vegas. Meeting and interacting with the tens of exhibiting tea companies there inspired me to create something similar for the general public, something which, to my knowledge, didn't quite exist anywhere in the U.S. at the time. Then in the fall of the same year, the Fowler Museum at UCLA asked me to create programming in conjunction with their comprehensive exhibition survey *Steeped in History: the Art of Tea*. Bonnie Poon, the Fowler's programming manager at the time, and I created the tea bus tours. Now, instead of bringing people to the museum for a tea experience, we did almost the opposite—we transported them to unique tea experiences around the city. This later became our festival's fall programming for a few years and inspired

me to create a much more tea-focused educational program.

In 2010, I moved the festival from February to May and dropped the Valentine's Day connection, thus initiating a name change to the “Tea Lovers Festival”, which was eventually completed by 2011. This newly transformed tea festival had two main components—a *Tea Lovers Marketplace* of select tea exhibitors and a *Tea Educational Program*. The new format called for an invigorating new location. Royal/T, a Japanese-inspired, city-block-long, contemporary art and event space in Culver City, became the festival's base until Royal/T's closing in 2012.

This transformation created such a buzz that in 2010 the festival was attended by over 800 tea lovers. The following year, we extended it to a 3-day event, with a *TeaVIP Opening Night* and a much more focused Tea Educational Program, consisting of three levels of classes—tea tastings, tea studies and tea labs. Then in 2012, we stretched the festival to a full-month of events, celebrating the love of tea throughout the Los Angeles area. This format, which continued through 2014, brought us not only our most diverse audience to date, but also allowed us to produce much bigger and innovative educational programs, such as *Battle of the Bakers*, probably my favorite tea lab of all time.

Throughout the decade, I made sure we always had an all-inclusive and unique programming,

which was never the same from year to year. We had to continually think out of the box and transform, changing formats and venues, not just to be different, but for survival in a city with a novelty-loving and fickle audience. And as a result, we are one of the longest running tea festivals in the United States, a fact of which I'm quite proud.

Our innovative accomplishments are many. In addition to destinations within Los Angeles, our *Tea Lovers Bus Tours* went to Ojai, San Francisco and San Diego. We created unique fundraising collaborations such as our *Tea Lovers Blends*, cross-organizational marketing programs with cultural institutions in the city, a regular e-Newsletter informing close to 3,000 tea lovers of what we (and our partners) were doing, and an annual membership program, which was later replaced by successful fundraising campaigns on Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Our festival has always been for all ages, featuring our *Kids-Love-Tea-Too* program with tea etiquette classes and other fun workshops for future tea lovers. What's more, we are the only tea festival which continually features art and cultural programs, such as exhibitions, film screenings, music and dance. I personally believe that if you educate the public in the culture of tea, the commerce will come naturally.

It's all documented in this book, which is of course meant as a kind of archive of almost everything we've done. Each chapter

represents a year in the life of the festival, or a tea bus tour. But it's not all about the past, as we've also included new material—we've asked some of our esteemed tea educators over the years to contribute tea-related tips and recipes for you to try and enjoy.

The book is also full of images, which on first glance may look overwhelmingly repetitive. But it's all on purpose. Utilizing snap-shot photography, with multiple exposures of similar moments, is the best way in a flat medium, such as a book, to transport someone back in time and space. While looking at the images, I hope that those of you who experienced our *Tea Lovers Festival* will conjure up good memories of attending our events, and those of you who never attended will wish that you had. And in turn, I'm most hopeful that this book inspires many of you to create something similar in your own lives. Not necessarily to start a full, long-running tea festival—although that would be nice, as it would allow me to finally participate just as a tea lover—but to take this global, yet communal, beverage of tea and share it in creative ways with family, friends, neighbors and nearby strangers. In doing so, you'd be building crucial personal connections and thus transforming sprawling, impersonal cities, and other such places, into close-knit and caring communities.

For the tea, culture and community lover in all of us!

Kulov ♥ Founder & Creative Director



photo by Jenae Lien Baguley

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