

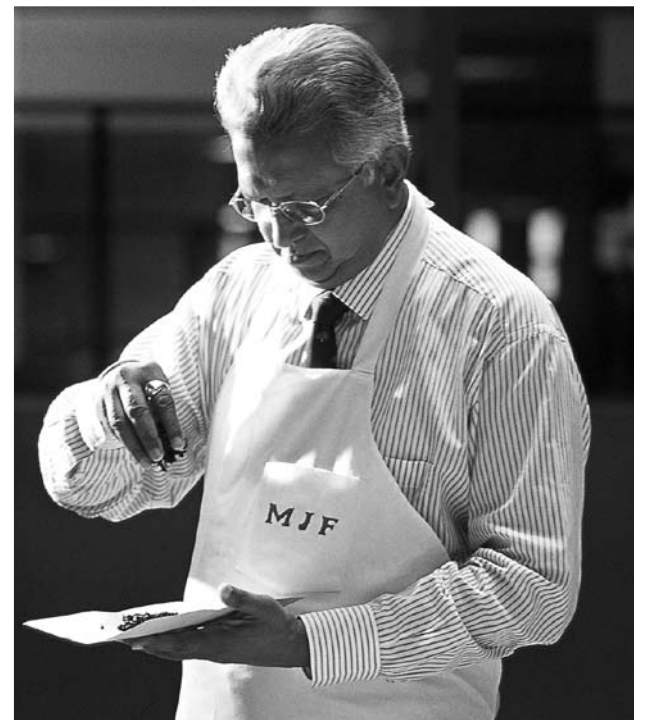


Cream of the crop

At Dilmah, quality and charity go hand in hand for the Fernandos – the first family of tea in Sri Lanka. FOOD travels to Colombo to get a first-hand view at what makes this family and their product so special.

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Although Merrill J. Fernando was born in May, it's natural for him to feel like it's his birthday on several days of the year. This isn't because this 78-year-old grandfather who's always up for a laugh and exudes a contagious warmth is so likeable, but in fact, as the founder and owner of Ceylon tea brand Dilmah, he constantly receives little gifts from devoted consumers thanking him for the fine product that he has put on shelves in over 90 countries worldwide. And then there's also the load of unsolicited advice, which the soft-spoken Fernando takes very seriously.

"I always value my customers' input and try to implement it if I can and if I can't, I explain why," says Fernando who personally replies to all correspondence from consumers. "It gives me a lot of satisfaction because Dilmah has a face – a picture and letter from me is on every box – and buyers can see someone they can talk to and hence get attached to the brand."

Currently Fernando is writing his 9th letter to customers, telling them about his personal commitment to the product and high quality standards that has long been Dilmah's philosophy when Fernando first started the company 20 years ago. Initially trained by the British as a tea taster, Fernando worked with a small family company as a buyer for bulk tea before he visited London, then the capital of the tea world. He found certain discrepancies in the global tea trade, which he sought to change, starting in his homeland.

"I believed that I could guarantee consumers the finest single origin tea on earth, fresh and packed at the source," says Fernando of his business plan that still stands today while chatting over a cup of tea at his palatial home just outside Colombo. "With Dilmah I broke the colonial mould of business and decided that I would share my company's profits and help the poor, our workers, community and reinvest in making tea sustainable."

However, this was not going to be easy in a market dominated but multinationals. Despite being ostracised by the tea community and branded as trouble by the government, Fernando went on to create Dilmah – a combination of his sons' names, Dilhan and Malik – which made him pioneer the concept of 'single origin tea' that is picked, processed and packaged where the tea is grown and marketed by the company as well. This also made the astute businessman the first Sri Lankan to contain the value-addition process in the country, eliminating middlemen and channelling the profits back into the country.

"At one stage no one wanted to know me, I was like a leper," says Fernando of his

initial struggles, his face still reflecting the pain he went through at the time. "I feared that I would fail and I had a lot of resistance and hardly made any profit, but I had to convince the government I was doing the right thing and finally they turned and started to give incentives to exporters of value added teas. Five years later, everyone was doing what I had started."

Donning an apron with his name embroidered on it, Fernando tastes up to 5,000 cups of tea per week and is one of the few tea makers who develops his own teas. Starting with his famous Ceylon Supreme blend, Dilmah's extensive range now includes green teas, flavoured black teas, single estate teas and fruit infusions as well. To ensure that consumers only savour the best, the company still employs orthodox production methods that maintain the five pillars of their philosophy – integrity, the customer, quality, tradition and ethics.

"The best lesson I learnt from my father is to pay attention to small details," says older son Malik of his father's stringent quality standards. "Nothing is too small to ignore when it comes to your product, especially a premium product like Dilmah." Today both sons work closely with the company, younger son Dilhan as the director of marketing and Malik as the director of operations, with a view to bring consumers back to real tea and educate the younger generation about what goes into the making of a quality product.

Explains Dilhan: "We would like to share with a new generation of tea drinkers the fact that tea is an amazing beverage not only for that wonderful variety and the fact that there is a tea for every mood and every occasion, but also for the fact that it is a healing herb, offering protection against almost every lifestyle disease. Most importantly, we would also like to engage with our modern customers on their terms, offering tea with style, which was the motivation behind the t-Series designer gourmet tea range."

Visit the Dilmah office in Peliyagoda, Sri Lanka and the whole family's passion for the product is obvious as they join their fellow tea tasters to try out new products and explain the intricacies of the cultivation and production process to visitors. Held in high esteem by their employees, it's also not uncommon to see the Fernando men down in the factory chatting to workers with the same sincerity and attention that one would reserve for a close family member.

"Adopting a simple down to earth manner in relation to our interaction with workers and caring and sharing with them is what makes us different," says Dilhan, who is often seen interacting with staff members rather than spending time alone in his private office. "Of course there is a temptation that as the business grows, one could distance oneself from workers although that will simply not happen in our family business."



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Left: The different faces of Merrill J. Fernando – (clockwise from left) with his sons at home and tasting tea; with two of his grandchildren; grading tea at the MJF premises; tasting tea with his sons and grandchildren at the Dilmah tea factory.



Above: Fernando with tsunami affected children in 2005.

Since the outset, Fernando has been helping his employees in small ways with loans, subsidised healthcare and education grants adhering to his motto, that ‘business is a matter of human service’. In 2003 the MJF Charitable Foundation (www.mjffoundation.org) was established, which allowed the family to expand their philanthropic activities by using sizeable profits from the company to help empower communities, slum children and also reach out during times of natural disaster, like the tsunami in 2004 when Dilmah and the foundation contributed approximately 50 million Sri Lankan rupees for emergency relief and rehabilitation programmes for children. And now, like superpower Bill Gates, Fernando and his two sons have decided to bequeath all their wealth to charity.

Question Fernando about his decision and a wide smile spreads across his face. “I brought nothing to this world and cannot take anything back with me,” he says, wiping his misting eyes. “The success of my businesses and the wealth I have justly and fairly acquired have not come through my own efforts, above all it was divine help and the efforts of the people who have worked with me.” But was it a hard decision? “It was actually the most comfortable thing for me to do,” he says grinning.

Today, Fernando considers tea and tourism – the MJF Group owns and runs the Ceylon Tea Trails bungalows and luxury resort, the Fortress, beyond Bentota – his two main businesses and still continues to be involved in all aspects of business and the MJF Charitable Foundation as well. “Both tea and tourism are 100 per cent local raw material and 100 per cent natural Sri Lanka,” he says, obviously proud of his birthplace. And for a man who continues to promote his homeland and whose hard work will benefit generations of Sri Lankans after his passing, no country could ask for a better role model, or a more fitting brand ambassador. ■



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Perfect tea

- Start with using fresh quality tea. One cup requires one teaspoon (around 2g) of tea.
- Always use spring or mineral water. Tap water is a no-no.
- Boil the water at 100°C – no more.
- Pour the water on top of the tea and not vice versa or the tea will float.
- Close the lid and let it steep for three minutes for a mild flavour and five minutes for a stronger cup.

Tasting tea

Like wine, the height and surroundings where tea is cultivated has a deep impression on its flavour. They are generally divided into three elevations: low-grown (600m) which tends to be dark and harsh, mid-grown (600m to 1200m) is lighter and the flavouring characters improve and high-grown (1200m and above) is extremely light and is fresher on the palate. The characteristics of these elevations are perfectly encapsulated in Dilmah’s Watte series that features four single estate teas that have been developed for discerning tea drinkers. The entire range is available at Spinneys.

Tea and food

The next time you’re wrapping up a dinner party offer your guests some tea to complement their dessert. Mint tea works well with chocolate, oolong with cheesecake and chamomile with apple pie. To match tea and food, the strength of both flavours have to balance, hence the stronger the flavourings used, the stronger the tea you’ll need to carry those flavours. Another way to play around is also use contrasting flavours like strawberries and mint tea, blueberries with vanilla tea or a spicy chicken with a cup of earl grey. “The matching of tea and food is a bit hit and miss so you have to keep trying,” advises Dilhan.