

You can't take it with you: The not-to-go teahouse model



**STAY FOR TEA:** (from left) Customers relax at the Samovar Tea Lounge; prepared matcha at The Green Teaist; making tea at the Dobrá Tea Room.

Some tearoom owners believe properly brewed tea is best when savored, not gulped from a paper container during the morning commute or noisily slurped in a cubicle. They think drinking tea should be a relaxing, meditative experience, not an exercise in speedy service and easy portability. That philosophy has led some tearoom bosses to implement a strict “no takeaway service” policy, citing quality, authenticity and building brand loyalty as primary reasons for enacting such a rule. An emphasis on educating both employees and customers is crucial to the success of this unconventional approach to serving tea.

The Green Teaist opened last fall in Lake Forest, Ill., and offers fresh green teas from Japan in an elegantly austere, minimalist space that mixes modern European design with a style reminiscent of the elegant teahouses of Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and a major tea-growing region. Hoken S. Seki, president of The Green Teaist, says the main purpose of the salon is to introduce guests to premium Japanese green tea and to encourage them to become connoisseurs, goals not well-served if customers take their tea away rather than lingering at a table.

Offering properly brewed tea is an important aspect of educating customers' palates. Each type of tea served at The Green

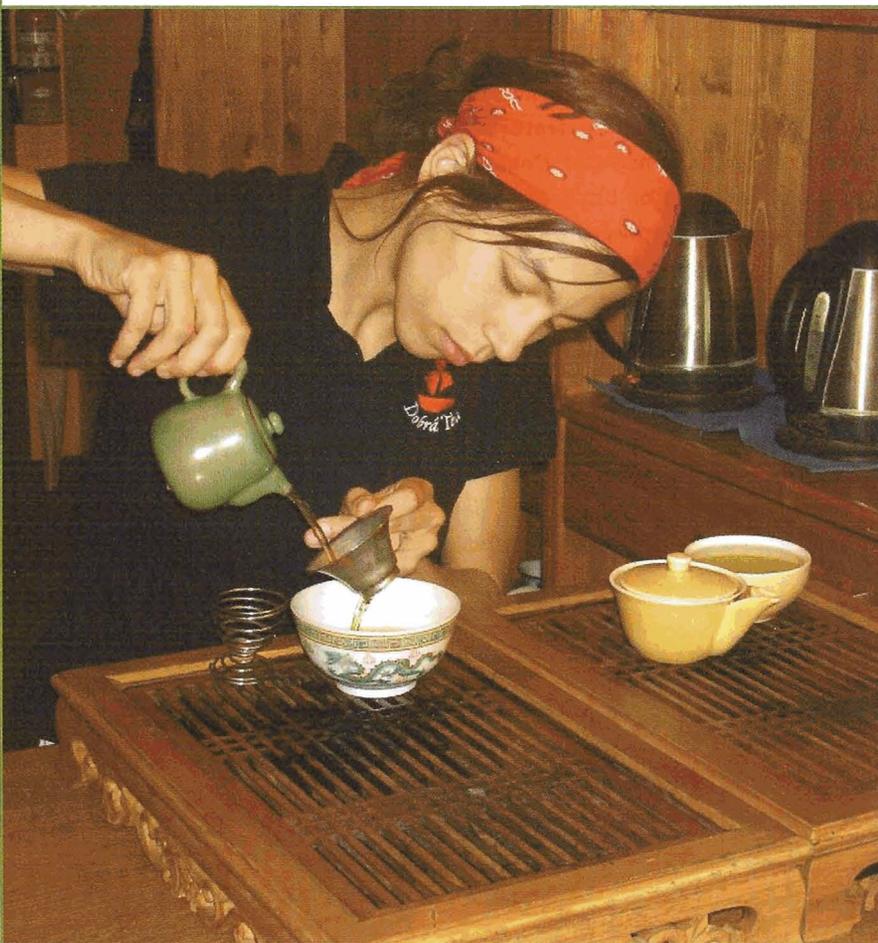
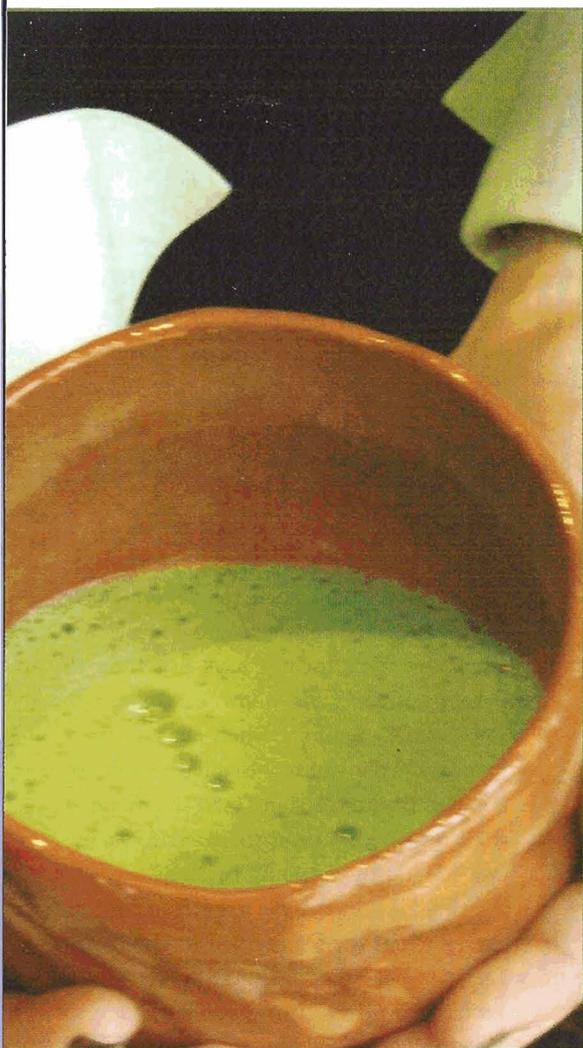
Teaist is brewed following strict rules pertaining to temperature and leaves-to-water ratio. Every pot is individually prepared at the guest's table, an attention to detail that Seki says precludes takeaway service. “Japanese green teas are very delicate and subtle, and unlike ceramic or glass cups, paper takeaway cups impart their own flavor, which is another reason we do not offer takeaway service.”

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Adam M. Ernst, owner of Dobrá Tea Room in Madison, Wis., with his wife, Sarah Nettie, cites quality as one of the reasons their shop doesn't offer takeaway service. The Bohemian-style



ADAM ERNST

teahouse furnished with an eclectic mix of rattan furniture, Oriental and Middle-Eastern rugs, and custom-built cabinetry serves teas from a diverse range of cultures including China, Japan, Turkey, Morocco, Russia and Britain, as well as India and Sri Lanka.

Dobrá Tea opened its first tearoom in Prague, Czech Republic, in 1993, and now has two locations in the United States. Before opening in Madison last year, Ernst worked at the Burlington, Vt., location, which does offer takeaway service. Because each tearoom is individually owned, Ernst, who wanted to focus on offering traditional tea service, did not have to adhere to the same model. "People see takeaway tea as a tea bag in a cup of hot water, but that's not what we're offering at Dobrá Tea in Madison," he says. "We serve loose-leaf tea and all our tea is made to order, with special attention paid to the infusion time. We want people to 'experience the cup' in terms of flavor, fragrance, aesthetic appeal and steam."

When Jesse Jacobs, owner of San Francisco's Samovar Tea Lounge, opened his first location in 2001, he thought of teahouses as the tea equivalent of the local coffeehouse, so he offered takeaway service. But he says he soon learned that in order to survive,

he needed to change his business model—including eliminating takeaway service. "The average person doesn't know much about tea and needs more knowledge," he says. "We needed to educate people about tea and value." Jacobs notes that it was difficult to persuade customers to pay \$3 to \$10 for loose-leaf brewed tea in a paper cup when they were comparing the price to a \$1.50 tea bag in a paper cup filled with hot water. "We needed to create a rich, robust experience to justify the price and bring people back to Samovar," he says. One way to do this was to serve tea in an authentic form (loose leaf, properly brewed) to customers who were sitting down. Another way was to educate them about the possibilities for multiple infusions.

In the past three years, Jacobs has opened two more Samovar Tea Lounges in the San Francisco area. Although each location features a different physical structure, they share a similar design aesthetic that Jacobs describes as "slightly Asian with modern functionality."

Although The Green Teaist, Dobrá Tea and Samovar do not offer brewed tea for takeaway, all three sell their loose-leaf teas and tea accessories for brewing tea at home. Each tearoom sources its teas carefully, valuing them in a way similar to fine wines in

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terms of provenance, bouquet and taste.

Seki says most of the 18 different fine Japanese green teas offered at The Green Teaist come from Maikonocha (which means “the tea of the apprentice geisha”) in Kyotanabe, Kyoto, and are sold loose-leaf in branded packaging featuring a trademarked logo. Ernst says Dobrá Tea buys its wide range of black and green teas directly from growers around the world. The tea is handpicked and hand-processed. Depending on the time of year, the Madison tearoom serves and sells 50 to 70 kinds of loose-leaf tea. Samovar also buys its large array of teas directly from growers, says Jacobs. Most of its loose-leaf teas are sold pre-packaged in cans.

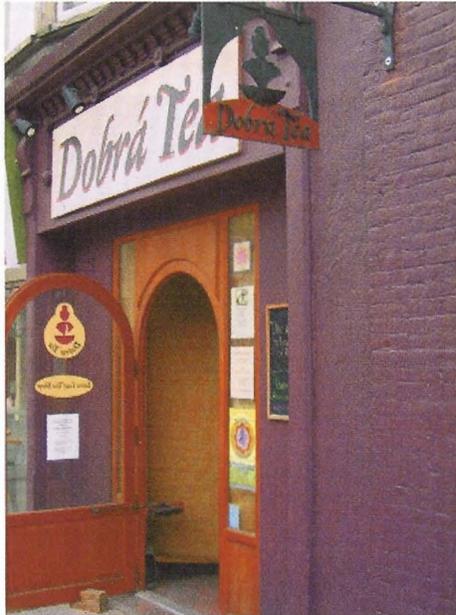
Retail sales of tea and accessories (both in-store and online) account for about

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15 percent of Samovar’s gross revenues and 25 percent of Dobrá Tea’s. The Green Teaist expects the majority of its revenue to be generated by retail sales of tea (from its shop adjoining the salon and its Web site) and wholesale tea sales to hotels and restaurants.

While their business models may rely on very different sources of revenue, target demographics and presentation, Seki, Ernst and Jacobs agree that customer education is a key element for success. They say that highly trained staff and printed menus rich with detail are among the most important tools for achieving this goal.

The Green Teaist, Dobrá Tea and Samovar all tried using part-time help when they first opened, but each switched to hiring committed professionals to provide superior customer service. Staff members at The Green Teaist have prior experience in the restaurant and hospitality industries, wear uniforms that emanate a subtle elegance and have been trained by a tea master from



NICOLE POIRIER



**COME ON IN AND RELAX:** (from top) The entrance to Dobrá Tea Room exudes an eclectic vibe; the Green Teaist has a minimalist approach to decor that draws focus to the tea; at the Samovar Tea Lounge, customers can sit at the bar and converse with a tea sommelier.

Japan. Ernst says his full-time employees receive 15 to 20 hours of paid training and are also required to do a lot of additional homework in order to pass mandatory tests before they can work on the floor.

Jacobs’ staff receives a three-day orientation followed by an exam. For the next month, they are encouraged to drink all the tea they want in order to become tea sommeliers. They also must learn about pairing teas and the company mission before they are assigned to full-time positions. “People here are passionate about tea and eager to learn more, so we pay for half of any continuation training in which they may enroll,” he says.

At Dobrá Tea, the menu is housed in a binder and provides extensive background information about each tea served. “Our menu and our bells are great customer education tools for us,” says Ernst. Small bells on each table allow customers to signal staff members when they’re ready to order. “We wanted to give people an opportunity to relax and read the menu at their own pace, rather than having someone constantly stopping by their table to ask them if they’d made a decision yet,” he says. Each of the teas served at The Green Teaist is described in detail in its menu, which also offers tips about how long to brew each kind of tea, the amount used per pot and the temperature of the water. The tea is brewed tableside, and staff members offer guests an opportunity to inspect and smell the dry leaves beforehand. They also use a small timer to ensure the accuracy of brewing time. The Samovar Tea Lounge menu also offers detailed descriptions of all the available tea options.

While all three tearoom owners believe their “no takeaway service” policies have played an important role in building customer and brand loyalty, each says part of their success in using this tactic hinges on their location and careful choice of target demographic. Seki says, “I cater to people who are intellectually curious and who have the ability or need to relax for half an hour.” His Lake Forest clientele sounds similar to how customers at Samovar’s San Francisco locations or Dobrá Tea’s Madison location might describe themselves. ☪