



Les Jardins de Gaïa: **Organic By Creation**

Europe's leading supplier of organic premium leaf teas, Les Jardins de Gaïa, remains committed to its founding principals of organic farming, biodynamics and fair labor practices. **By Barbara Dufrêne**

Long before “organic” was ubiquitous in the global food and beverage industry, Arlette Rohmer and her partner Nico Ewen committed to organic farming in small gardens and under fair labor conditions. This was a gut decision based on their personal philosophy and it targeted a tea market niche with ideal ethics.

More than 18 years later, Les Jardins de Gaïa (Gaïa Gardens) has grown and prospered. Its commitment to organic and biodynamic agriculture together with decent wages and living conditions for the growers has remained the core of its business concept. This business approach is perfectly reflected in the company's name, “Les Jardins de Gaïa.” Gaïa is the ancient goddess of the earth in Greek mythology. Moreover, Gaïa's philosophy and business concept grows stronger with every new tea garden project, be it in India, China or Tanzania—a long list that covers 11 producing countries.

Rohmer was brought up the eldest of five girls in Wittisheim, a small village in the border region of Alsace, which belonged to Germany at times and is now located within the territory of France. The girls used to go for long walks in the



All of Gaïa's products have full traceability back to the trees and the bushes of their origin terroirs.



Gaïa founder Arlette Rohmer looks for small and remote tea gardens with traditional ways.



woods with their father, who taught them to recognize, smell and taste wild berries and leaves. From her early years, Rohmer was aware of the incredible wealth that unspoiled nature offers to mankind. She soon recognized that human life and the planet earth can only prosper within a sys-

tem of mutual respect. "I was a tea lover since my school time and during my study years I realized that only very few quality teas on the market complied with my beliefs about ethical agricultural production as a whole," Rohmer said.

Gradually these ideas crystallized

into a business concept and the company, Les Jardins de Gaïa, was created in Rohmer's native Alsace, in 1994. The company's strategy to source exclusively high-quality organic teas was innovative and demanding. The EU provisions for Organic Agriculture had been adopted in 1991, thus the selling of organic teas meant that it had to meet precise regulatory requirements.

It was in 1995 that the EU authorities started to implement pesticide residue limit regulations across Europe. In 1997 the Fair Trade Label Organization launched its campaign to improve market access and product revenues for the small growers in the southern part of the globe. All these criteria and quality requirements fit into Gaïa's business approach and basic philosophy, but no such teas were currently available.

Strong, Lasting Partnerships

Building a reliable supply and creating an appropriate network of sourcing partners for such teas was therefore the first chal-

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lence for the new company. Being an intrepid traveler, Rohmer set out to discover them, looking for small and remote tea gardens with traditional ways and ancestral product knowledge.

One such new (and current) partner was Binod Mohan, son of the founder of TPI (Tea Promoters of India), which owns several tea estates in Darjeeling, Assam and the Dooars, of which Selimbong TE, in Darjeeling was the first to be certified organic in 1995. Within their tea estates the TPI team has also assisted the small independent local tea growers to get federated in cooperative structures making their own TPI factories available for the processing of these small-

holder teas. There are also the cooperatives in South Africa, growing organic rooibos that joined in 1996, followed by the group of small organic farmers, SOFA, in the Kandy region in Sri Lanka, who started to supply their teas to Les Jardins de Gaïa in 1997.

Step by step the continuous travels allowed the company to establish a comprehensive network of organic tea growers across the continents and whenever possible with the requirement for fair labor and living conditions. The sales catalogue has expanded and now includes herbs and spices, sourced under the same stringent quality conditions as the teas.

That precise choice of sourcing only

organic teas, herbs and spices from small structures where workers' welfare is granted does not only limit access to supply, but also commands for higher price levels. Fully aware of these constraints the company gradually carved out its proper market niche and sales strategy. It does not have a retail store chain, just one big tea shop next to the production site. Gaïa also works with a mail-order catalogue. Furthermore, their teas are distributed by a dense network of Bio Coops, a French network of organic retailers and of course, tea houses and fine food shops. As a wholesaler and importer, Gaïa also supplies their teas to other brands. Gaïa participates with well-staffed booths at most of the organic food and well being trade fairs in France and also every year at Bio Fach, the international B-to-B organic food trade fair in Germany.

When Rohmer and Ewen launched the company, they had strong convictions. The years have passed and shown that this narrow path could be traveled successfully and it gradually appeared that more and more smaller operators were aiming towards similar goals. Taking up this new challenge for further improvements, Gaïa was instrumental in setting up a new international, not-for-profit structure called Trust Organic Small Farmers in 1997. Through this organization, small producers, importers and wholesalers have joined forces to add the sustainability concept to the organic and Fair Trade certifications. This new global network, which has some Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) support, also has a realistic market approach. It aims to ensure that all the smallholders get enough visibility and market access to sell their crop at fair prices.

Rohmer is satisfied and enthusiastic about this new structure, feeling that the huge amount of good will and trustful cooperation have generated a series of new incentives that are now bringing more high-quality teas to the market and better revenues to the growers. She is proud of the long list of ongoing projects including 24 small producer cooperatives of which four are in India, nine in China, three in South Africa, two in Vietnam, one each in



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Sell directly from chinese tea garden



Gaïa directly sources its nearly 450 varieties of organic tea. Gaïa's one shop is located next to the production site.

Nepal, Laos, Tanzania, Egypt and Argentina. There are also 11 tea estates involved in such improvement projects, of which 10 are in India and one is in Korea.

From all these places Gaïa directly sources their nearly 450 varieties of organic green, black, oolong, white and yellow leaf teas and their rooibos, maté, lapacho and other exotic herbals and their spices. All products have full traceability back to the

trees and bushes of their origin terroirs. Furthermore, Gaïa has the biggest share of its product list under Fair Trade Label certification, thus ranking as number one in the French tea market. In addition to its own sourcing, the company is the exclusive distributor for the French market of two premium Japanese tea brands: Keiko, with tea gardens in Kyushu Island and Ayia, the world's biggest producer of matcha, located in the centre of Honshu Island, close to the tea fields of Shizuoka.

Every year there are special events and achievements that the company proudly shares with customers in its annual sales booklet such as the newly certified tea cooperatives and estates who join the suppliers' network, the new production site that opened in 2004, the additional warehouse opening its doors in 2010, and the various producers' delegations visiting Gaïa's headquarters. In 2005, Rohmer's dream project was finalized: a Japanese tea house surrounded by five traditional gardens in the true tradition of Zen Buddhism. It is a beautiful and peaceful spot where customers can enjoy a perfect cup of tea and where Cha No Yu sessions (Japanese tea ceremonies) are scheduled every month.

The wheel continues turning for Gaïa. Ewen left for new horizons in 2009, therefore Rohmer is now solely in charge again and planning for more progress and bigger volumes. Convinced that the chosen path remains the right one, she feels that tea drinkers in France and other European markets are becoming increasingly aware of the need to preserve nature and the need to share and to care for the remote rural populations in the producing countries. She continues her backpack travels that take her around the world as she attempts to visit all her "tea projects" at least once every other year.

So all augurs well for Les Jardins de Gaïa, which will soon celebrate its 20 years of existence. ☕

Barbara Dufrêne is the former Secretary General of the European Tea Committee and editor of La Nouvelle Presse du Thé. She may be reached at: b-dufrene@orange.fr.



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