

THE OXALIS STORY

The inside story and travels across the globe

Petr Zelík



MLADÁ FRONTA



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*Dedicated to my late mother,
who left the world in 2011.*

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PART 1

**My childhood was so free and easy,
while life as an adult has been anything
but straightforward.**

~

My years in Moravia

I grew up in Lipník nad Bečvou, a picturesque town situated beneath Helfštýn Castle on the eastern edge of the so-called Moravian Gate. My childhood was idyllic, since my parents and I lived near a large, well-maintained park that belonged to a château. Close by were playgrounds and areas given over to sport, as well as a swimming pool. Most of my leisure time was spent outdoors with friends, free of such modern distractions such as computers or mobile devices. I often visited my grandmother, whose home stood near two Jewish cemeteries in Lipník. The town had had a sizeable Jewish community before WWII, but the only vestiges of it that remained were memorials. The unsettling atmosphere imbued by the surroundings is forever etched in my mind. Enhancing such sensations was the romanticism lent to the locale by a substantial weir on the River Bečva, which seemed as if it had been cut out from a dramatic work by the author Hrabal. Certainly, these aspects all intertwined and played their part in shaping my soul.



My idyllic first years in Moravia. Christmas 1968, cradled in my mother's arms.

In 1980, I started at the grammar school in the nearby town of Hranice na Moravě. This choice of educational establishment afforded me the opportunity to consider the future. My granny's wish was for me to become a physician, since this occupation had never been pursued by my forebears. Thanks to her and the rest of my family, I felt a positive push towards this goal. Anyhow, my grades were good enough and the expectation was that I could apply to any university I desired.

I've always enjoyed the sense of being free, reliant on myself alone in the management of my affairs. This was fully the case when it came to higher education. As on numerous occasions later in life, I looked into my soul to discover what was closest to my heart. Geography and languages stood out as obvious choices, informed by a desire to explore reaches that stretched beyond the Iron Curtain. Hence, the course I eventually plumped for was foreign trade at the University of Economics in Prague. It was precisely this specialisation that would permit me to see a wider view of the world.

In addition to studying economics, I wanted to be good at languages and travel to different countries. I wished to discern how things actually worked in the various "prohibited" nations. In hindsight, I must say that this was a naive notion, since attending a course on foreign trade did not automatically mean excellence in languages or guarantee exploration abroad.

However, my family proved a little wary of my decision due to the necessary move from Moravia to Prague. By way of explanation, circumstances were then rather constrained. Things are much more open today – the world is smaller so such doubts might seem hard to comprehend.



To remain behind or leave?

I applied to the university and was accepted without an issue, so my four-year sojourn in Prague commenced in autumn 1984. The capital city turned out to be more liberal than conservative Central Moravia, permitting me to encounter points of view that had been considered taboo until then. Discussions with fellow students in the dormitory encouraged us to reflect on our history and contemplate options for forging a life under the existing communist regime, these being informed by our growing knowledge of alternative perspectives.

Then it all came to a head. My room-mate – a close friend of mine – emigrated to Germany in 1986, leaving me alone in the space we had shared. Two years later, during my period of mandatory military service, my first girlfriend also left Czechoslovakia. Although it took place after we had split up, I was profoundly affected by both events.

The one year in the military I had to serve ended in 1988, at a point in time when the Warsaw Pact was still intact. People close to me were emigrating, and I pondered what would be waiting for me upon my return – just how much I could reconcile a future in socialist Czechoslovakia. Hope of change came in the form of Gorbachev's perestroika. Nevertheless, while neighbouring regimes were toppling to the ground, Czechoslovakia still weathered the storm. Initially I adored Gorbachev, viewing perestroika as a means of salvation, a desirable path for release. Gradually, though, I began to appreciate that any change had to be deep and profound, since the system had become too cumbersome for reform.

I returned from the army in September 1989. Afterwards, I moved to Olomouc to work at the headquarters of Sigma. There the decadent degradation that marked socialism's last hurrah was clear to all. Opening a bottle of wine in the office was the norm, no one made much of an effort and prospects were poor. This reinforced my sense of hope for change.

The hot summer of 1984. The time between my studies at grammar school and university was the period I gained in independence and started to consider my prospects more seriously.



Fortunately, the following November was marked by the onset of the Velvet Revolution, and I revelled in the optimism that abounded in the square in Olomouc. The dilemma I'd faced my whole life was finally resolved, since it was now clear that my future would be linked with my homeland in the heart of Europe. Actually, I believe that this measure of good fortune had resolved it on my behalf. I'd started to think about emigrating and begun putting together a list with all the pros and cons associated with life behind the Iron Curtain. At that time, Canada was my dream country, which I eventually got to visit in the spring of 2017. Once there, decades later, I went over in my mind just how things might have been different if I'd taken that path in life. Obviously, my family wouldn't exist in the form it is now and no company would have been founded, so I'd have set about creating something quite different in another place altogether. Goodness knows how this would have turned out. However, everything is exactly as it should be.



Slušovice, for the first time

Following the nation's Velvet Revolution, in January 1990, I decided to move from Olomouc to Slušovice and work in foreign trade as an employee at the local cooperative. Why Slušovice? Well, foreign trade was still not decentralised but concentrated within enterprises, primarily in Prague. An agricultural group in Slušovice had been exempt from that and was authorised to conduct business abroad independently. Getting a job there was a relatively simple affair as the capacity of their foreign trade department was insufficient.

However, I joined the organisation after its gradual disintegration had begun. As with many other state-run or partially state-run enterprises, it became clear that its organisational structure was crumbling fast. Once again, I experienced a sense of disillusionment. In all, I spent my year there living in lodgings nearby in Dešná – a building shared with builders who worked alternate weekly shifts. Often, they were oily and dirty when they arrived in the evening. For me, this environment was perhaps worse than the situation I'd endured in the army. So, in 1990, I said that enough was enough. Things had to change as I couldn't stay there any longer. Something fundamental had to happen.

These beginnings were hard but valuable from today's perspective, as I believe they galvanised me. The job entailed that I work as an assistant to foreign trade representatives, doing menial tasks to aid them. I handled simple technical matters and, in the process, learnt about matters which would sustain me in the future.

From today's perspective, it sounds all so old-fashioned. For example, I remember how I waited in a queue for the telex machine to send messages abroad. I also recall how great it felt to receive a typewriter that boasted nothing less than erasure tape! It was still the early days of computing in the country, and no primitive mobile phones were around as they were abroad. Such was the beginning of the nineties in Czechoslovakia. There was I in my lodgings, earning the grand salary of CZK 1,950, with the belief I would never save enough to buy a home or car.

Off to Europe

I dreamt of travel. Money was tight, but no administrative barriers were barring the way any more. So, in 1990, I bought a ticket to tour Europe by train. I left with 100 German marks in my pocket and tins of food. I drank water at stations, eating sparingly. In Italy, I had everything stolen except for my train ticket, meaning I had no choice but to return home. Just a couple of days later, though, I resumed my adventure in foreign countries. Despite being a somewhat careless venture on my part, the journey proved highly valuable, as I had finally gained some insight into how things were in the western world.

Indeed, capitalism was slowly on the rise in the former Eastern Bloc, even in Czechoslovakia. Back in Slušovice, there were five of us employed in one of the foreign trade offices at the cooperative. Like numerous others were doing at the time, we decided to go into business together, setting up a firm called DAPEKO as a result. However, we were an ill-fitting group of individuals, each with different interests. We even set out not knowing exactly what line of commerce to follow. Eventually, we decided to run a trading company that would buy and sell whatever was available. How very naive...

The first deal

Fortune smiled on us. We started out by importing a special kind of device from Hong Kong to Czechoslovakia – language translators, which interpreted sentences entered into them in up to ten languages. These were in demand domestically because very few people had any ability in this respect. Having come across one unit by chance, it seemed to be a great invention.

We presented the appliance to Kvatro Slušovice, a company which expressed an interest in it, demanding ten of thousands of units at a time; they were ready to pay no less than nine million Czech koruna (CZK) in advance, this to a brand-new, limited liability company with absolutely no history and a base capital not exceeding CZK 100,000.



It'd be fair to say that the entire venture was a roller-coaster ride. Uncertainty dogged every aspect until the very last moment. We were unfamiliar with the structure of ownership in Hong Kong, the operation was managed via an intermediary from Belluno, Italy, and nothing was straightforward about it. In brief, we transferred money that was not ours although we didn't actually possess the goods. The chances of it all going south were very real. We had a deadline to meet for import within thirty days, but still nothing had arrived, so clearly we were quite anxious. Thankfully, on the very last day, a plane arrived in Munich with the units, and we immediately placed an order for express dispatch of the goods from the airport. In the end the products arrived at the customer at literally one minute to noon. It'd seem that God wished us well as our first accumulation of capital had been completed.

It was then that we all decided to quit work at the agricultural group and follow a new path – jump trains, so to speak. The first attempts at privatisation were evident at the cooperative, whereby vouchers were distributed to its members. Things didn't go swimmingly, though, as certain “piratic” individuals started to buy them up from others, thereby concentrating the assets of the crumbling corporation. Its privatisation took a wild course, and circumstances started to resemble the degradation I'd witnessed in Olomouc. Seeing such decay once again convinced me that it would be better to manage my career myself; I didn't belong in an environment that didn't suit me. The impetus in me to engage in business was growing.

Dealing in tea

Returning to the former theme, the first deal concerning the translation devices earned us our first income. However, it was clearly just a one-off and no regular opportunities would arise from it. Nevertheless, something happened that turned out to be a totally ground breaking event in my life. It's difficult to assess whether such moments as these are coincidental or steered by some form of destiny.

In the case in question, a representative of the Austrian branch of Teekanne appeared in what constituted our private office, carrying samples of tea bags. Recognising we were linguistically able to communicate and full of youthful vim and vigour, he offered us the chance to distribute tea. We liked the packaging, but weren't familiar with the product at that time. Little did we know that Teekanne was the largest producer and distributor of tea bags in German-speaking countries; in short, we were completely ignorant of the importance of the company and there was no Internet to look them up on.

We took him up on the offer in the knowledge that, unlike the translation devices, success in the endeavour would permit us to promote the brand domestically for years to come.

The capital we'd gained through the first deal, combined with funds borrowed from relatives, enabled us to buy two lorry loads of tea bags. A pleasant shock was that we immediately sold them to branches of the Pramen supermarket chain in Ostrava and Brno. By the following year, our turnover of Teekanne tea had reached 80 million CZK! In 1991, we put all of our efforts into a wholesale outlet for foodstuffs, adding nuts from Hamburg, preserved mushrooms from the Netherlands and fruit juice from eastern Germany; i.e. goods otherwise unavailable in Czechoslovakia. Although the assortment soon became cumbersome in its sheer diversity, Teekanne teas remained our prime product.

Sadly, though, conflict rose its ugly head amongst the five of us. While one wanted to build a house, another hankered after a fancy car and a third demanded investment in the form of shares. Hence, in 1992, only two remained out of the original group of five.

Later in the year, Teekanne invited one of us to fly to Sri Lanka to visit plantations as part of a study trip. It was a call I couldn't resist. Fortunately, my colleague showed no interest in it, so I got to fly out. This formed another milestone in my life!



Tea for life

Sri Lanka bewitched me. I found myself in a Buddhist country full of smiles and modesty, and seemingly endless tea plantations. Literally, fresh tea and the nation's post-colonial atmosphere worked their magic on my mind. The contrast between the ongoing, wild, revolutionary ferment back home and the quiet, unspoiled life of the plantations was enormous. I felt so different upon my return that I was inspired to make a change. I comprehended that there was strength in simplicity, formed by a desire to completely focus on just one thing. By now, I had spent three years in commerce devoted exclusively to accumulating money. I needed to bring a sense of the Buddhist peace of mind and humility to my life somehow.

Naturally, external factors played a role in all of this. One was that Teekanne had been considering setting up a processing unit in Lípa near Zlín, with the aim of supplying countries in Central Europe. However, at around the point of my visit to Sri Lanka, the decision was taken to split Czechoslovakia into two separate states – the Czech and Slovak Republics. This meant that the geographical region which included Zlín ended up lying east of Bohemia, the latter boasting ten million inhabitants, whereas it had occupied a central position. Eventually, Teekanne opted to erect the plant in Krakow, Poland, so plans for it to come to Lípa fell through.

Influenced by the trip to the tea plantations, and the unwelcome news that Teekanne was to build a factory in Bohemia, my belief was affirmed that a change was due. I decided to pursue options relating to loose leaf tea and finish at the DAPEKO company. I informed my business partner and the Salzburg-based HQ of Teekanne.

Interestingly, Salzburg reacted well to it as loose leaf tea wasn't viewed as commercially impinging on Teekanne's products – primarily tea bags destined for supermarkets. In fact, the managers were welcoming and helpful, and a Mr Steinwendtner, the senior executive at the time, even recommended a wholesaler of loose leaf tea in Vienna to me, whose door I knocked upon just a few months later.

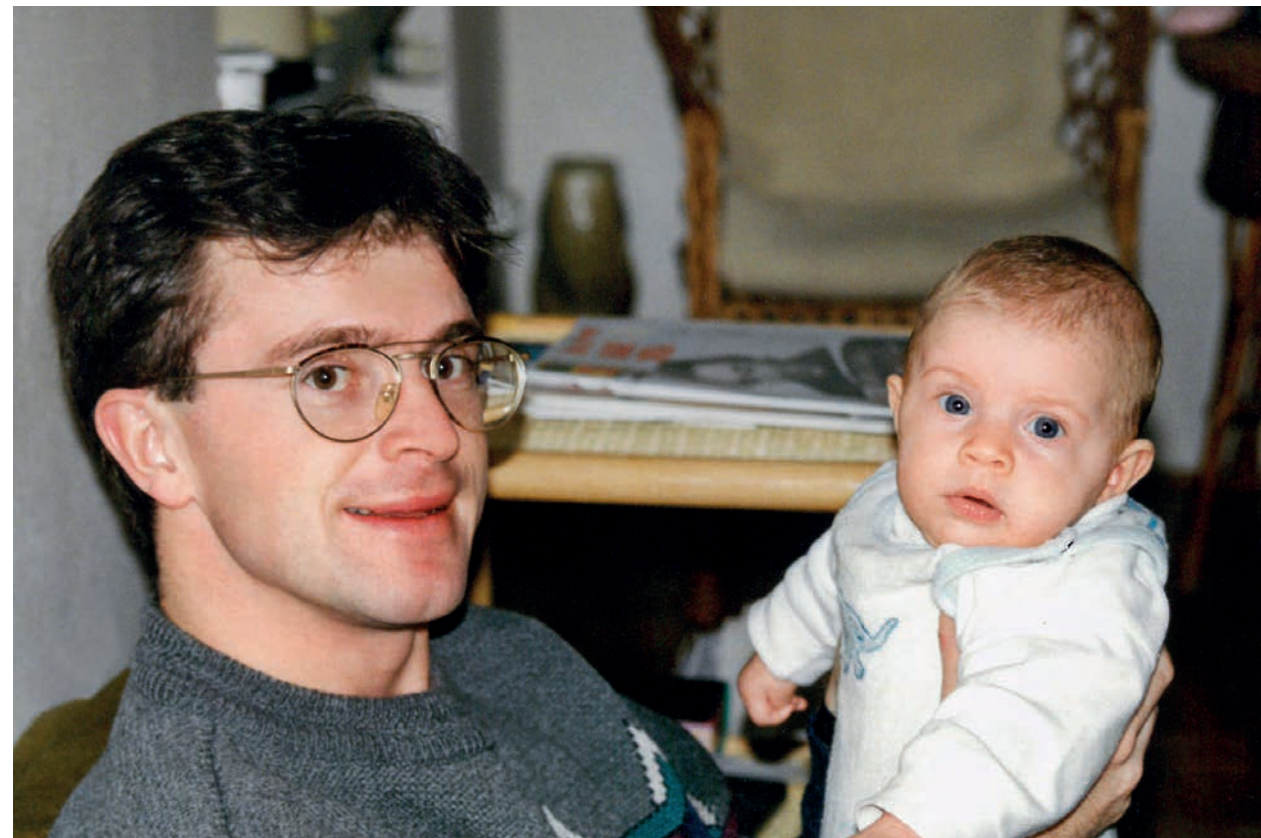
Indeed, 1992 proved to be a turning point for me. Having been profoundly affected by my trip to Sri Lanka, everything really took off. I began a personal relationship at the end of the summer, getting married in April 1993. OXALIS was founded in the following July, and my daughter Kristýna was born in October.

Looking back at the five-year period of 1988 – 1993, it seems as though I was a very different person year-on-year. Anyway, by the close of it, I needed to put down roots and create a sense of order.

Tea is not gold

After a few months of preparation, I launched my latest sizeable project – a tea room (“Čajový dům” in Czech), which opened in the latter half

The year 1993 was important. I decided to settle down and my daughter Kristýna was born.



of 1994. Located in the street of Sadová in Zlín, it comprised a specialised tea shop downstairs and a stylish tea room on the floor above.

It stood out from the competition, as rival institutions were more modest in their ambitions. Generally, the operators of such premises were also the sellers, and a “Čajovna” would be based at the operator’s own premises, or at least in a low-rent area. Mine was different. I paid rent corresponding to the centre of a major city, and it made a loss from the very beginning, amounting to 80 – 100 thousand CZK annually. As the income from it was insufficient, I thought that loose leaf tea would prove unsustainable and another activity might have to supplement the business.

Given that I had studied at a university specialising in economics, I decided to make use of my expertise in finances, opting to bet on hire purchase (HP) schemes. I travelled to Vienna to visit the economics



By the mid-1990s, both my company and family were enjoying good times. A trip with my daughter to the Prater amusement park in Vienna.

institution there, and bought professional literature describing how to conduct small undertakings dedicated to specific subjects of an HP contract. I found that similar activities existed in western Europe, so it wasn’t just illusory. Concentrating solely on a particular market segment could bring success. It seemed to represent a short cut to make up for the losses of the slow trade in loose leaf tea. I told myself that focussing on something marginal and unattractive to large companies might reap rewards.

A lot of dentists were setting up their own practices and in need of new equipment. One such individual I was in touch with simply required a new drill but didn’t have a clue about how to get it. An idea was born and I set out in the venture. I bought specialist software for conducting the HP business, and devised a re-purchasing mechanism. In the event that a client failed to pay off the debt, the unit would return to me and I’d try to sell it off. It was a challenge to borrow about 10 million CZK from the bank in order to get my HP dental drill business off the ground. In the end, the bank lent me a one-off sum; I wasn’t going to be permitted any more, so I set to work. An issue I faced was that not every contractee paid in a timely fashion, nor was everyone successful. Eventually, I was much relieved that after three or four years my loans had been paid back without the whole thing going belly up. Obviously, this project had failed to meet my expectations, while the tea house remained something of a sinkhole.

In the spring of 1995, Teekanne got in touch once again. The managers in Salzburg were opening corporate premises in Volyně, South Bohemia, and on the look out for a managing director. Another option was on the table. To me, Teekanne still tugged at my heart strings, whereas loose leaf tea hadn’t lived up to its promise. Prior to being offered this position, I had signed a rental agreement to open a tea store in a shopping centre in Prague named Vinohradský pavilion, since I wished to continue building up my company. Thankfully, Teekanne allowed me to do this while working for them; to facilitate this, my father helped out, temporarily, by becoming OXALIS’ managing director.



My family in 1996.

Every Monday I set off on the 350-kilometre journey to Volyně, returning home again on Fridays. However, I spent weekends engaged in my own entrepreneurial activity. It goes without saying that my family were suffering as a result. This situation lasted a year before things became unacceptable.

A proposal was made to Teekanne's managers in Salzburg to move the Czech HQ to the capital city – Prague, where all the shopping chains had based theirs. This would also be a very convenient, central place to distribute from. A logical argument, it was accepted by the company, so Teekanne relocated to Jeneč near Prague at the close of 1996.

In the meantime, OXALIS was on the ascendant. While the Vinohrady shop was doing well, it was outshone by premises established at yet another shopping centre – Centrum Černý. Asking my dad to fill in

had been worthwhile, and I remained involved at weekends. However, burning the candle at both ends was exhausting, so this could only ever be a short-term arrangement. It was becoming obvious that I'd have to quit my post at Teekanne and dedicate myself to OXALIS. Hence, in 1998, after three years of cooperation with Salzburg, I returned to Moravia.

Afterwards, I sought to build on the success I'd achieved. In 1999, commodity coffee was incorporated in the range to augment turnover. Moreover, consumers were responding well to the flavoured blends of tea we'd developed. These were important for the financial standing of the company, because OXALIS was no longer reselling goods from Hamburg or Austria, and we had the capability to set more desirable margins.

The turncoat

By the end of the nineties, OXALIS boasted five shops of its own, while a franchising operation was also developing. In fact, the latter was not truly franchising as such, since the people involved sold tea exclusively from us in the glass canisters we provided – no additional condition existed. Nevertheless, these outlets represented a kind of franchise, and very pleasant places they were, too; e.g. flower shops, with our tea products tucked away somewhere. In any case, my company's turnover rose satisfactorily and its trajectory was headed towards success.

No clear blue sky was visible just yet, though, as clouds started to gather again at the approach of the millennium. This particular storm centred around a certain long-term member of staff, who stated they had a claim in the interests of the business. Their employment dated back to soon after OXALIS' establishment. However, the misgivings I'd held since my experience with the previous firm, concerning the many and various issues of ownership, meant I didn't concur with their statement. We failed to find a way to continue our cooperation,



so the person's employment contract ended by mutual agreement in August 1999. So far, so normal.

There I was, enjoying myself at the company's Christmas party in 1999, when the bombshell dropped that said former employee had stolen all the existing recipes and taken on a position at our sole export partner's firm in Slovakia. OXALIS didn't possess any trademarks, and was less well off in capital than today. Moreover, its position in the marketplace was fragile compared to nowadays. I'd underestimated circumstances and a shadow of threat hung over the firm.

What followed was a period of three years of ruthless competition, although calling it a series of low blows would be closer to the truth.

As is so often the case, personal difficulties aggravated matters. The first years of the new millennium were utterly draining. In 2005, I collapsed and ended up in hospital for a couple of days. Simply, my body had had enough. So, after some good times, things took a dive again.

Nevertheless, nothing lasts forever. The catalyst for change was that the Slovak competitor was unable to keep their prices low over the long term. Although they opened shops in Slovakia, the entire venture was under-capitalised and finally went under. My ex-colleague attempted to revive his fortunes twice more through different companies in the Czech Republic, but failed on both counts by 2005. The fight was finally over.

Retrospectively, I realised that it was all about staying in the game, digging in and keeping going. The company was in good health with rising turnover. Eventually, I discovered a silver lining or two in all of it. The ordeal had accelerated OXALIS' progress in creating new tea blends and had patents in place to safeguard its bestselling products. In actual fact, 1 million CZK was spent on ensuring this form of protection. Concurrently, we had been opening one shop after another as they had thrived. Such successes came a little too thick and fast, though, as the firm's growth was somewhat unsustainable.

Ups and downs

The situation finally stabilised, while OXALIS continued to strengthen its position and witness rise in turnover year-on-year. Truly, the shadow hanging over it had vanished. It was then that two very contrary events occurred in my personal life. Wonderfully, my son Matyáš was born in 2007, 14 years after the birth of his sister. Unfortunately, though, my mother was diagnosed as being terminally ill, eventually passing away in 2011. The cycle of life is ever thus.

Getting back to the subject of OXALIS, it celebrated its 25th anniversary in July 2018. This was following a restructuring of the firm a year earlier as a holding company, consisting of the newly established OXALIS a.s. (plc), as the parent company and four limited liability companies: OXALIS (a wholesale distributor), OXALIS retail (an operator of

OXALIS was fully up and running. New machines were purchased - for example, this one for making blends of tea.



shops), OXALIS real estate (an owner of property) and OXALIS Slovakia (for shops in the Slovak Republic). The new organisation clarified each economic activity of the firm, increased transparency externally and secured matters in a general sense.

In 2017, OXALIS exceeded – for the first time ever – a turnover of 250 million CZK. Now, the number of permanent employees totals 120, not counting dozens of temporary staff. The retail network has expanded to encompass 65 units – 35 shops and 30 franchising outlets, accounting for 57% of total sales. Another 20% is made up of export trade, and the remainder comes from hundreds of individual retailers selling specialist products or gifts or running health food outlets. As for the share of products in turnover, tea still prevails (60%), while the ranges of coffee and accessories/gift packs generate 20% each. The company's activities have diversified sufficiently and stand firmly on several pillars.

Enjoying a cup of tea at the store in the Nový Smíchov shopping centre.



For the near future, several strategic objectives have been set that are expected to strengthen the company's position.

We at OXALIS believe the Czech Republic has the capacity for 75–80 OXALIS retail stores to serve its population of ten million people. The plan is to open more shops and extend cooperation with franchisees, which should heighten concentration of turnover in what is considered “the backbone” of the company.

Export is how we face up to West European competitors, which currently accounts for approximately 50–60% of total turnover. Ultimately, we wish to make OXALIS a company driven by export, providing multilateral support to engender this. A master-franchise handbook has been compiled to this end, detailing pre-requisites for promoting our franchise framework abroad. Another aim is to open up our e-shop to inhabitants of certain EU countries.

As for the future, the intention is to arrange the business's organisation over the next few years so that no single position is associated with another one, thereby ensuring clear differentiation in duties between employees.

Storage and distribution premises are going to be extended to facilitate sufficient capacity for further development. In addition, substantial investment is envisaged on improving machinery and supplementing what is already in place. Finally, furthering the education of staff shall help the company maintain its edge in productivity and knowledge.





PART 2

OXALIS is my third child.
I couldn't imagine life without it.

~

Call it cloverleaf

The inspiration for the company's name occurred at a tea party one Saturday, and was settled on by my wife and I. We considered several Latin names of plants that sounded nice. In fact, one was Protea – a South African genus of flower. However, we didn't opt for it because its pronunciation leans towards English, but people speaking other languages – such as Czech – would express it differently. Anyway, Oxalis was the eventual winner, which means cloverleaf (or a type of sorrel), so the thought it might just bring good fortune was also in our minds.

The company of OXALIS was officially registered on 29th July 1993. The office was modest, inhabiting the dining room section of the small one-bedroom flat I shared as a newly-wed with my wife in Zlín, on the street of Mokrá, number 289. Our daughter was born soon afterwards. My hands were very full with one thing or another.

After working out of the flat for a couple of months, I rented two offices on the first floor of a building on the street of Nad Ovčírnou at number 3685, a former boarding school of the Bata shoe company. The entire company then occupied just 80 m² of floor space. I took on two employees with the aim of trading in loose leaf tea and opening a shop with a tea room in Zlín. An intense search for suitable premises in the city centre ensued, leading to establishment of a tea house on the street of Sadová in 1994. Meanwhile, the first four pallets containing blends of loose leaf tea arrived from Vienna, which we had to carry to the offices in bags weighing twenty kilograms each. Sales were slow, though, as awareness of loose leaf tea was virtually non-existent at that time. Indeed, it took nearly twelve months to sell even this small quantity. Doubts crossed my mind in 1995 as to whether I'd done the right thing.

Nevertheless, greater prosperity was to come after we opened some shops in Prague over the next few years. Having outgrown the rented office spaces, it was necessary to find larger premises.



OXALIS has branched out beyond trade in loose leaf tea.

After a search, we took over a location on the street of Mlýnská, in the Malenovice suburb of Zlín, which also became the company's registered address. In all, 400 m² was leased by OXALIS, in what had been a laundry, in the belief that it'd serve the firm for its lifetime. In fact, this proved naive, and yet the same sentiment was often repeated later on. Expansion was necessary two years after relocating to the Mlýnská address; hence 200 m² was sourced in a former restaurant – number 353 on the street of Mokrá, soon joined by 150 m² on the street of Bratří Jaroňků. So it was that OXALIS found itself in three places in Zlín, while a distribution warehouse also operated in Prague, in the suburb of Běchovice.

More logistical difficulties were encountered at the cusp of the millennium. The necessity arose to concentrate all operations in a single place and increase floor space. In 2001, we purchased a property at 663 K Teplinám that had been offered for sale as a result of the bankruptcy of a canteen belonging to a business called





Starting out in the flat, complete with a balcony, on the first floor.



The location where teas were first blended by OXALIS – on the street of Mokrá, Zlín.



The first official headquarters of the company on the street of Nad Ovčírnou.



The warehouse on the street of Bratří Jarožků.



The next registered address of the rapidly growing firm in the suburb of Malenovice, Zlín.



The company's headquarters since 2002, in Slušovice, a town near Zlín.

Agrokombinát Slušovice. This address was officially registered as the new headquarters of the company. Comprising 3,300 m² over two floors, it was extended in 2007 by another floor. Further expansion occurred eight years later (in 2015), when we purchased and refurbished a distribution warehouse located in a small town near Zlín called Tečovice. At present, such premises belonging to the company encompass nearly 6,000 m² in total. The plan is to enlarge this capacity more in the years to come.

Tea and beyond

As previously described, OXALIS set out by buying, processing and redistributing loose leaf tea. Business was slow to begin with, primarily due to consumers' lack of knowledge of the commodity. Therefore, the decision was taken to diversify the assortment of items sold in order to turn a profit in the new shops and boost the prosperity of OXALIS.

Tea-related accessories were introduced soon after the first tea house opened in Zlín in 1994, comprising tin caddies, glassware, china and porcelain tea ware, strainers and filters. These were necessary to round off the range comprehensively.

Gift packs joined the ranks of products a few years later, initially based solely around loose leaf tea; this segment has gradually gained in importance.

Assessing the running costs of OXALIS' stores at shopping centres revealed that sales associated with tea alone were insufficient. Clearly, it was necessary to add something else that would bring in more customers. Our response was logical. Commodity coffee was introduced in 1999, which was an important step forward for the company, followed by flavoured coffee and accessories. We began to roast beans in-house in 2011, going on to stock select coffee beans, and entering into business contracts on a direct trade basis. Additionally, a line we call tasty treats was ushered in (after the year

2000), which now comprises honey, cordials, chocolate, cocoa, sweeteners and liqueurs.

Now the range encompasses almost 1,500 items (including individual types of tea and coffee in various packaging options). Rather than continuing to expand ad infinitum, the aim is to stabilise the company, and perhaps slightly reduce the mix of products. No form of tea is absent from our assortment, and we stock coffee from every major country harvesting it.

The team – the soul of OXALIS

Every company is shaped by the people working at it – the success or otherwise of the endeavour is in their hands. They inform its internal corporate culture and public image.

At the outset, I did everything at the company. I was its stock keeper, chief financial officer, secretary, furnisher of shops and, for a while, even waiter at the tea room. Gradually, as it grew, a more complex structure began to take form, and the duties of employees diversified. For a long time, numerous positions essentially combined two jobs in one. For instance, those employed in export also handled marketing for two years. Although the structure of the company has been largely set, some departments still carry out mixed duties; e.g. Retail Network Management remains connected with Marketing or Human Resources, with tasks shared between certain staff. Further fine-tuning shall take place in the next few years.

The company's administration comprises the Managing Director and Financial Director (one person), the controlling, import and export departments, a marketing department with graphic designers, and the HACCP & ISO Manager. Of crucial importance are 4 tasting specialists, who develop new products and monitor existing ones. Wholesale trade (domestic) is managed by 2 female sales representatives. Several dozen people are employed at the





The team at OXALIS – crucially important to the firm and its future success.



processing and distribution premises. Out of the total number of 120 people, half are active in the company's retail stores.

The company is compact in form and functions well, as evidenced by its recent accomplishments and position in the market place. Everyone displays a sense of professionalism, while internal dynamics encourage staff to do their utmost. It may be that certain employees are not tea or coffee enthusiasts, but their professional approach is unimpeded by this, mastering their work regardless. Indeed, this is the also experience of competitors from elsewhere, be it Hamburg or Rotterdam, with over 100 years in the trade. Of course, it's extremely important for the company to have its share of aficionados with a passion for the products. Both such camps compliment each other at OXALIS.

OXALIS' stores – the most valuable asset

Way back at the beginning, even before founding the company, I dreamed of opening a stylish tea room somewhere quiet in the city of Zlín. My search got underway in early 1994, bringing to light an small, old, tatty house with a small garden in the street of Sadová. It appeared to be an oasis of peace just a few hundred metres from the city centre – an ideal location. I contacted the owner, an agreement was reached and its refurbishment followed a few months later. The work was to be carried out by OXALIS, at its own expense, and in return the rent for five years would reflect this investment. The ground floor contained mangers, from what had been a stable for horses, while we even unearthed a WWII parachute on the first floor! In fact, the premises hadn't been used in the intervening period. First came the tea room on the upper floor, the shop being added below in 1995. This is the story behind the stylish Čajový dům (Tea House), which far outstripped what its competitors had to offer. Although my dream had been realised, the economics of the situation – due to the expensive refurbishment – lagged behind, and the amount spent on it was never fully



recouped. The tea house did find its customers, but I was forced to close it in 1999 at a loss incurred through the cost of setting it up and then operating it.

OXALIS' stores feature state-of-the-art design

When I set out, it was unclear how loose leaf tea could be put on display to capture people's attention. To begin with, the leaves were placed in tin containers. Since consumers were largely unfamiliar with such tea, it occurred to me to show it off in glass jars. This would allow shoppers to view the tea and its structure, then they'd take in the aroma after opening the lid. These jars were placed on three rotary tables for better access to their

OXALIS' stores feature state-of-the-art design.



contents. Despite the lacklustre performance of the first shop in Zlín, this form of presentation was a bona fide success in other outlets.

In the autumn of 1996, a renovated shopping centre in Prague (“Vinohradský pavilon”) was opened. In fact, it was the first one in the Czech Republic to be modelled on those in western countries. Inside was the very first OXALIS shop in the capital city, situated immediately next to the Julius Meinl supermarket. Naturally, it featured our new glass jars, which were filled with tea or mixes of nuts and dried fruit, though not coffee as yet. It soon proved a hit with people from Prague and further afield, lured in by the various attractions of the shopping centre. Indeed, we received feedback from shoppers that it'd be great if other OXALIS stores opened elsewhere in the country. As wholesale trade began to take off, a path to prosperity began to materialise.

The shop at Vinohrady pavilon was furnished in dark wood with a slight shade of cognac. The counter's design featured holes for glass jars containing loose leaf tea, and the walls were fitted with shelves to hold the accessories we sold. This simple style was carried over to every shop afterwards until a major change in design in 2015.

Another important shop in the company's history opened in the autumn of 1997, at a different centre in Prague – Centrum Černý Most, not far from our new distribution centre in the suburb of Běchovice. OXALIS has continued to make advances ever since, and its retail network has grown substantially over time.

The look of the stores was altered somewhat in 2012, after a period of consultation with an external agency. Following discussion on our retail outlets, we agreed to roll out changes and modernise existing units. Although the furniture remained the same, the boards displaying the logo at entrances was greatly altered, plus new internal features were added or improved. For instance, lighting was enhanced, coloured wallpaper with a pattern of tea leaves was introduced, the layouts of the shops were



subtly modified for the sake of clarity, and each product range was labelled separately.

The most radical change came about just 3 years later with what we've dubbed the ZEN look. The dark furniture has been replaced by stylish units with clean lines and a lightly coloured finish, and we've opted for distinctive lighting, tin caddies for the sale of orthodox teas and large floor tiles. The aim is to lend the stores a sense of simplicity, airiness and modernity. So far, 10 shops have been renovated in this way and the remainder shall be transformed overtime.

The rise of franchising

This area of interest started out with the introduction of wholesale trade at OXALIS in the mid-1990s. Until a certain point in the past, what franchising existed was modest in extent. A growing number of wholesalers agreed to purchase loose leaf tea solely from us in exchange for receiving the aforementioned glass jars, the shape of which was patented as a registered design. Therefore, it wasn't franchising in the true sense of the word. After a while, though, there were 50 such "franchisees". Eventually, in 2008, we were offered membership to the Czech Franchise Association.

After studying the principles of proper franchising, we decided to update things to comply with contemporary European standards and consulted a professional adviser on the matter. This resulted in a guidebook that exactly defined future franchising operations at OXALIS. In 2011, we became a full member of the Association, so the transformation was complete. Unfortunately, several original "franchisees" chose not to accept the updated terms and conditions and ended their cooperation. Nevertheless, a new group of franchise partners emerged that were willing to follow the guidelines. Our endeavours were rewarded in 2015, when our franchising concept was judged in a national competition as ranking amongst the top 5. Once OXALIS' approach to franchising

had been shown as viable domestically, it became necessary to forge a system for masterfranchising that could be exported to other countries. The intention is to implement this in the coming months.

Transforming coffee beans into tasty brews

1. ROASTING COFFEE

We started roasting coffee in-house in 2011, firstly on a Merlin roaster by Loring Smart. It was state-of-the art at the time and the most environmentally friendly option available, with a

The Loring Smart roaster – a major asset to OXALIS.



maximum roasting capacity of 15 kilograms of green coffee every 15 minutes. We assumed that this would be sufficient for the future period, but demand for our roasts exceeded all expectations, so we bought a new one with higher capacity in early summer 2013. We decided to stay with Loring from California, since the Merlin had proven a very capable unit, this time opting for the more powerful Kestrel model. It can handle up to 35 kilograms of green coffee in one batch, and is just as technologically advanced as its smaller sibling. Indeed, the Kestrel is the choice of established firms in America, Canada, the nations of Scandinavia and Japan – places renowned for their coffee culture. Numerous award-winning baristas at the Cup of Excellence contest have utilised beans roasted on the Kestrel. Boasting cutting-edge, patented technology, which Loring refers to as Flavor-Lock, this truly is a smart way to roast – energy efficient, more economical and friendlier to the environment.

Unlike standard roasters, Loring devices feature a burner that creates hot air for roasting and subsequent incineration of smoke and odour. A cyclone located above the burner takes up combustion gases, where combustion of almost all particulate matter occurs. The cyclone is where shells are separated from the waste gas and collected in a special vessel. During this operation, most of the hot air is recirculated, thereby dramatically reducing the need for additional heating. One burner and two heating zones cut fuel costs by up to 80% compared with conventional roasters through use of an after-burner. Such innovations minimise the presence of oxygen in the entire process. Finally, cooling takes place via a water screen, the greater moisture additionally helping to lock in the taste of the beans. This is maintained through rapid cooling off, when the beans drop from the roasting chamber into a drum, in which the beans are stirred to prevent any further roasting. Prior to then, the process takes place in a closed, air-free system, meaning that climatic factors do not affect the resultant taste of the coffee. Smart control

mechanisms permit uniformity between batches, alongside an automated control unit with a touch screen, giving feedback in data on the roasting process every 6 seconds, enabling the master roaster to obtain the optimum profile and consistency. The machine can even be controlled remotely from a device connected to the Internet, for example a PC or phone, while firmware updates are handled online. In fact, it's even possible to download and share roasting profiles. This cutting-edge technology ensures complete control at every stage of the roasting process. The degree of roast is varied by the burner's output and airflow indicators, and the output data given allows the operator to respond accordingly and promptly.

2 . BLENDING AND FLAVOURING COFFEE AND TEA

Back in the 1990s, OXALIS still sourced tea from European suppliers – initially in Vienna, then Hamburg and Rotterdam. This led to occasional issues over freshness and we felt there was a certain lack of creativity on their part, while margins remained insufficient for the company to progress. Clearly, real expansion could only come about if we managed processing in-house. After some trial and error, consultation abroad and study of technical literature, the company really came into its own in this respect. So it was that – in 1999 the first teas blended and produced to unique recipes by OXALIS were launched. This laid the groundwork for a research and development laboratory – a milestone in the company's history.

Such was the beginning of our journey in devising original flavoured teas and coffees. This proved a prerequisite for export, as we alone were the ones adding value to the end products. We mixed different fruits and herbal ingredients into the blends, along with various flavours, which resulted in specific blends with colourful names, and the most successful were patented.





Tea is blended and flavoured under strict conditions in a cutting-edge facility.

Initially, we started out with ineffective equipment sourced domestically – humble beginnings, indeed. Nowadays, the firm boasts several sizeable blending machines tailored to our individual needs. We do not sell any blended products from external sources.

So, what is exactly involved in the process? Loose leaf tea and coffee beans are only flavoured with agents in a liquid state, which are injected into the blend. It takes 15 minutes to treat 150 kilograms of a mixture. The machine agitates the blend gently when adding the flavouring(s) evenly to achieve a uniform application throughout the blend. The flavourings are purchased from 12 countries, primarily those specialising in tea or coffee, many of whom have been providing us with goods that are stable in quality for many years.

Of these flavourings, 40% of them are natural in form, while the remainder comprise aromatic agents (alternatively referred to as nature-identical flavourings). A great many of them exist, e.g. forest strawberry is made from garden strawberries, tropical oranges give rise to blood-red Sicilian orange, sweet lemon harks from normal lemons, and there are several types of apple.

We sell 120 tonnes of roasted coffee annually, of which 55% are flavoured varieties, which utilise a type of Brazilian coffee as a basis. We switched from an African one in 2017 due to consumer demand, bringing about a smoother end product with a nuttier and more chocolate-like taste. A similar injection technique to that for tea is used, and most of the liquid agents come from a specialist American supplier. Interestingly, some flavourings for tea play well with coffee, but the opposite is a very rare occurrence.

A fascinating aspect is the preference shown by territory. Consumers who live inland tend to go for tastes like garden or forest fruits, while those in Central Europe relish heavier ones, such as products with blackberry or floral notes; e.g. rose is popular in Ukraine. In contrast, tropical flavours prevail in the Canary Islands. Indeed, many distributors stock items not sold elsewhere because they have not found favour internationally. Different countries, different customs.

3 . PACKAGING FINISHED PRODUCTS

Both tea and coffee have the property of quickly and easily absorbing moisture and aromas – good and bad – from the immediate environment. This was discovered as long ago as the 17th century by the Dutch, the first nation to ship tea to Europe. They discovered that storing a cargo of tea on board haphazardly would cause it to spoil completely during the journey, the leaves having taken on the smell of the salty sea and a fishy odour in the process.



Eliminating any such risk means the packing process and packaging utilised have to be very effective. OXALIS owns eight semi-automatic packing lines and one tailor-made, fully automated line (introduced in 2009). Customers inform us as to the packaging option they desire – hermetically sealed bulk-sized bags (15–20 kg each, primarily for export) or 0.5 or 1 kg bags (for wholesale). As for the retail network, tea is sold in bags of 30 or 70 grams (depending on the proportions of the specific product) and 150-gram bags for coffee.

It's important to stress that tea and coffee are kept completely apart at our production premises. To this end, isolated areas are employed to separate them from each other, a practice also extended to the segregation of pure and flavoured varieties. In fact, the processing of pure tea and coffee happens on different floors to ensure that no crossover in taste can occur. Naturally,



Tea is packed separately from coffee to avoid mixing the different aromas. The task is handled by modern packing lines.

such endeavour places considerable demand on storage and logistics, but the extra cost is necessary to maintain the authentic taste of each end product.

4 . D I S T R I B U T I O N

This activity has recently been centralised at a depot for that purpose in Zlín-Tečovice, which underwent major renovation in 2015. It's separated from the HQ geographically, standing near the town of Otrokovice and a motorway. The warehouse's ground plan of 2,300 m² is capable of storing sufficient stock of the entire assortment. A customer care facility adjoins it, also comprising a showroom. The site handles distribution to all domestic and foreign customers.

Quality control

The quality of tea and coffee is of utmost importance to us and our clientele, so we obviously do everything to ensure it. This means going above and beyond the demands of applicable legislation.

Initially, sensory evaluation of taste and appearance is given to samples from suppliers, be they tea, coffee or other raw materials. Subsequently, only the best of the samples are chosen—those complying with our requirements and parameters. As certain substances in such raw materials aren't visible to the naked eye, testing is carried out at an accredited laboratory periodically.

In terms of tea, inspection has to take place even prior to delivery, necessitating that tests are carried out for us in adherence to accredited methods and to identify the presence of pesticides. If a report shows unsatisfactory results, we refuse to purchase the affected goods. Further inspection occurs upon delivery of the raw materials to OXALIS. Samples are taken and compared with the original we received, on the basis of which selection was made.



Should the goods not comply with a parameter, the issue is taken up with the supplier. However, such non-compliance is a very rare occurrence as a result of cooperating long-term with suppliers. Notably, the results of inspections are recorded and the samples held onto for the sake of traceability and to facilitate potential analyses even after a considerable period of time.

The company has a quality management system in place, certified to ISO 9001, as well as a system governing the management of food safety – HACCP. In addition, all processes associated with producing coffee are certified to the level of IFS Food – an international standard for the safety and quality of processes and products.

Our tasting team consists of four fully qualified professionals, and each of them has undertaken sensory tests in order to perform their duties. Our perspective is that sensory evaluation requires continuous endeavour in sampling tea or coffee in order to improve at it. Very frequent tasting means that one is then able to discern specific tastes and aromas. Training can even involve using flavours specially created for the purpose. For such sensory evaluation, the tea and coffee has to be prepared properly and uniformity ensured for the item being tested.

Coffee is prepared in ceramic tasting dishes of about 220 millilitres. Roasted beans (13 grams) are ground in a coffee mill until the grains are approximately the size of granulated sugar. Then water at just off the boil (93–94°C) is poured over. Note that two testing samples of the same coffee should be prepared since a single bad grain might be present from one grind of it, thereby impairing it; hence the need for a duplicate. After the water has been added, the taster samples the aroma from the cup. After 4 minutes, the resulting crust on the surface is cracked. A spoon is used to smell the infusion once again, due to the intensity of the fragrant substances released. Afterwards, the crust is removed completely from the surface of the coffee and the brew is tasted and gauged for flavour. For coffee, fragrance, taste, acidity and body are the parameters assessed. Acidity refers to the degree of fruitiness, while body means its richness and layering, or,



We at OXALIS carry out tasting tests to provide customers with the very best tea and coffee.

contrarily, simplicity in taste. This is how one distinguishes between richness in body at one end of the scale and delicacy at the other. The findings are entered into a report and the tasters discuss the results of the evaluation. If the coffee is a new addition to the range, a flavour profile is created, which then appears on the product's label.

Tasting tea is slightly more complex, as several kinds exist and each differs a little in method of preparation. Special chinaware is used, comprising a 150 ml brewing cup, a lid for the same and a tasting bowl. Two grams of tea is weighed out and put into the cup, then poured over with water at a specific temperature (100°C for black teas, 90°C for other types) and covered with the lid. The leaves infuse for 3 to 5 minutes, depending on the type being sampled. Then the cup (with the lid in place) is tipped over into the bowl, so the



infusion pours out into the bowl. The cup has teeth on one side that act as a strainer for the tea leaves inside.

The infusion is then sampled using a specially shaped spoon, allowing the taster to sip the liquid in the correct manner. This is actually quite noisy, which may seem rather rude, but it's very important as sucking the liquid in permits air to permeate the mouth, dispersing the infusion to all the taste receptors and enhancing the ability to gauge its flavour. Each tasting procedure evaluates the dry leaves for colour, shape, scent and any content of undesirable components (grit, stalks, etc.), as well as the appearance and fragrance of the brewed leaves; finally, the colour, smell and taste of the infusion are assessed. The findings are written into tasting reports. For pure teas, the infusion prepared is stronger than usual (2 g tea per 150 ml water) so that any deficiencies in flavour are more distinct. For flavoured teas, the quantities used are lower (1.5 – 1.8 g per 150 ml water). Notably, the water temperature varies from 70°C to 100°C, depending on the type of tea. To make sure that a tasting session is carried out properly, it is essential to observe the dosage of tea, the temperature of the water and the length of time the leaves are infused for.

Artists with designs on our accessories – OXALIS design

In 2003, the Marketing Department had a cracking idea: why not get some graphic designers to contribute artwork for tea and coffee accessories? So it was that we approached the Faculty of Graphic Design at Bata University in nearby Zlín with the notion. Senior staff thought it was a splendid idea, and the students set to work. We then selected the most accomplished pieces from the submissions, sought permission from the faculty and the winning students and applied the designs to tin caddies and china mugs, which were manufactured in China, South Korea and Malaysia. This marked the beginning of something unique and special to us, a significant step forward.

Brand-new items for export were introduced later as a direct result. Cooperation even continued with some of the designers after they had graduated. Otherwise, we've commissioned works from renowned painters and artists from the country, avoiding stylistic repetition by working with different people every 3 or 4 years. At the very least, the products designated as "OXALIS design" help distinguish us from competitors, while also tapping into a potentially considerable stream of revenue.

Selling tea in a country without a single plantation

We have to import goods, there's simply no other option. To this end, OXALIS started out with a single supplier in Vienna, branching out in 1995 by cooperating with several partners in Hamburg and Rotterdam. Later, in 2000, we headed to Asia and began to source a limited amount of porcelain from China. At the same time, a couple of pallets of lemon myrtle were ordered from northern Australia, although this didn't turn out well, sadly. The ship was damaged by fire so we ended up dealing with the insurance company instead of anything more positive; such was our first loss incurred through importing goods.

Over the years, we forged connections in other developing nations, as necessitated by the growth of the company. Soon, India and Sri Lanka ranked in the list of countries we bought from, with more names being added to it with the passing of time.

Returning to the accessories briefly, an issue that affected us early on was the minimum quantity of goods that could be ordered, i.e. a full container load. Although this constituted a hurdle back in the noughties, the volume of goods has gone up steadily since, so today importing by the container is normal.

At the outset, we looked for business partners at foreign trade fairs or via some databases. Pretty soon, though, it was the large growers



and producers that began to seek us out. They knew OXALIS had its own chain of shops, distributed widely in its domestic market and exported elsewhere.

Despite the fact that growers in China or India might consider us a small enterprise, we have proven important to them because of our regularity in sourcing goods demonstrated over the years. Indeed, we do not purchase supplies in a random manner, and are able to guarantee a certain quantity every year.

Crucial supplying nations are China, India and Sri Lanka. The Chinese market is noteworthy because the best teas remain in the country and are destined for demanding and rich clients. Rarity teas are usually produced in limited quantities, often on small plantations with no export licenses. For these the price can be as high as 200 dollars or more per kilo, so wealthy Chinese buy them

Tea doesn't really come in crates any more. It travels out from the HQ in Slušovice to all over the world.



for personal consumption or as an investment. In contrast, India exports its finest teas from Darjeeling and Assam, and the most commonly consumed types domestically can be bought for just a few dollars per kilo.

Other nations have started growing the crop, too, so our range has grown to accommodate good examples. Africa stands out for its harvests from places like Rwanda, Malawi and Kenya. New Zealand produces some high quality tea we now stock, and we've even sampled leaves from the Azores and Scotland. Furthermore, our intention is to purchase tea from countries such as Georgia and Tanzania.

In addition to pure teas, we also import herbs and components for the blends we've created. In the noughties, a direct contact was made in the Republic of South Africa for the purchase of Rooibos and Honeybush. Egypt - known for the cultivation of a wide range of herbs - is another important source for us. Meanwhile, hibiscus comes from Nigeria, Brazil brings us Maté, Turkey provides fruit components and Iran is where certain flowers are shipped from. Truly, our suppliers are spread out across the globe.

What about imports of green coffee? Most is imported directly from sources in the relevant countries. In fact, a strategic objective of ours over the next few years is to achieve direct trade in the fullest sense of the term.

We've been importing tea and coffee accessories for a long time, such as cups, mugs, sets of items, canisters, strainers and filters. As mentioned above, some of these are customised with our own unique designs.

How do things make their way to us? Well, for purchases made directly from the grower/producer, or a local agent who deals with farmers, the given individual holds an export license and gathers everything together on their premises. The items ordered are carefully processed, packaged and labelled, then they're shipped out. In Europe, Hamburg is a key port for container ships. From there, the containers travel to us by lorry or train; delivery usually takes a month or two in total. Of course, exceptions exist to this,



primarily first flush teas (the very first batches of the season). These are flown in to Prague airport due to the need to get them out to our shops and customers in just a couple of days or weeks after the harvest.

In conclusion, here are a few statistics and trends to consider. Currently, we work with 70 suppliers in 31 countries. Most of the tea comes from China, India, Sri Lanka and Japan, while Brazil clearly dominates in the import of coffee, followed by Colombia. Comparing the volume of goods imported in 2007 with 2017, this figure increased by 85%. Since imports from within the EU have remained more or less the same, the dramatic increase is completely accounted for by supplies from elsewhere. It is worth reiterating that all our teas come directly from the given countries of production, and green coffee is largely sourced directly.

OXALIS' products across the globe

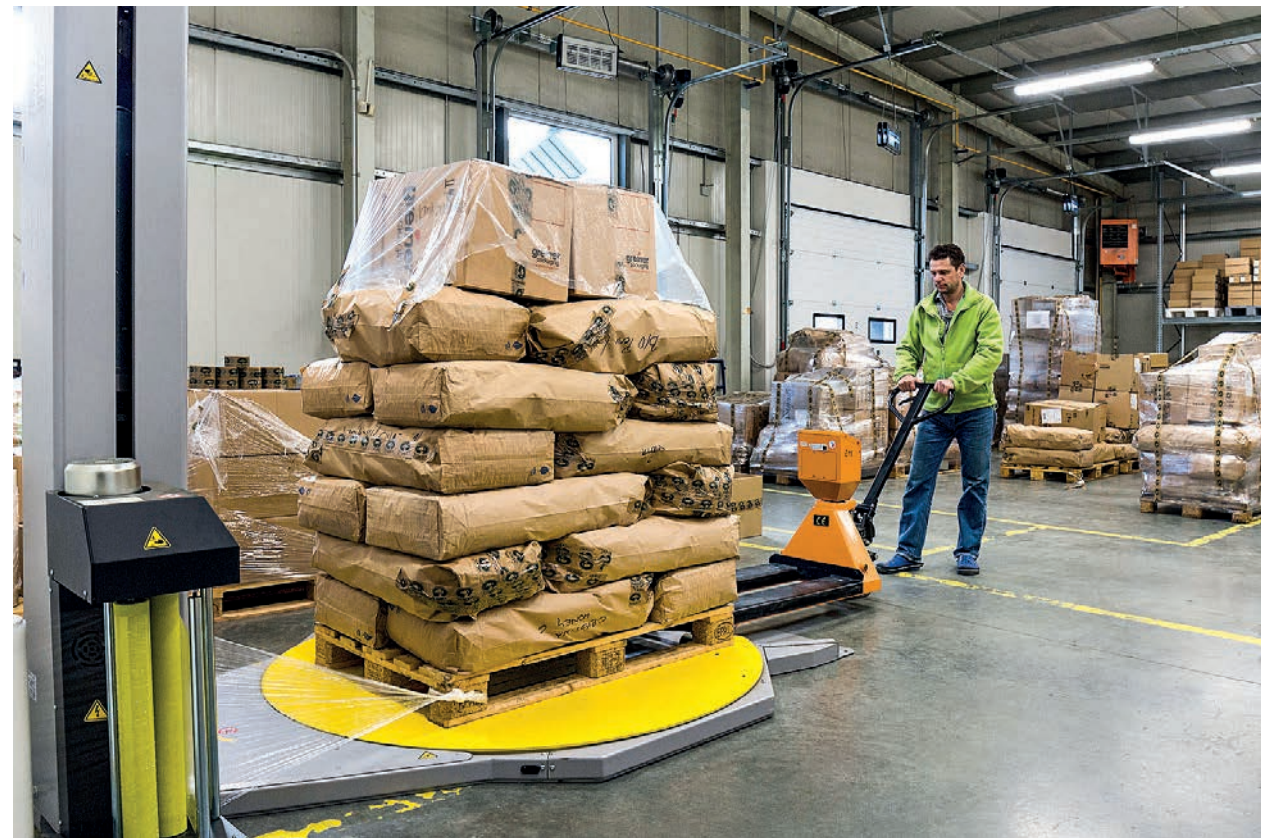
Exporting goods didn't even seem like an option when the company was still essentially a start-up, as trade proved sluggish in the Czech Republic. Then we still were only buying in and reselling finished products without adding any value to them. The potential for export only came about after we'd mastered the ability to process tea by blending and flavouring it. In doing so, the company began to create unique, original products to our own recipes, making the company more competitive and reducing costs, in addition to which profit margins remained sufficient. This turning point, at the end of the 1990s, allowed us to break into the neighbouring market of Slovakia, soon to be followed by Poland, Hungary and certain countries of the former Soviet Union. Supplementing the range with accessories featuring custom designs by OXALIS in 2005 significantly increased opportunities in this area, as these marked us out from the competition. We've introduced new items under the banner of OXALIS design every year since. Initially, export was handled by one person who also

oversaw marketing, but this changed in 2007, when we set up the Export Department, taking on two employees.

At the time of print, OXALIS exports to 28 countries, a number which is constantly on the rise. Of these, Poland holds the greatest market share and still shows potential for much more growth. Other major destinations include Slovakia, Great Britain, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Ukraine, followed by Italy, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Finland and Sweden. We also have a presence in Serbia and the Baltic States, and further afield in India, Singapore and Malaysia.

Obviously, we don't send tea back to Asia that we bought from there. Instead, the tea dispatched either comes from other territories or comprises flavoured, fruit or herbal blends, to which OXALIS has added value. It seems that globalisation is affecting Asian countries – the success of Starbucks is an example of this,

Tea is imported and gets exported, even to places like India!



so it's not too hard to imagine our flavoured teas and coffees finding favour in such nations, too.

However, securing distributors in that part of the world can be challenging. One way of doing so is by participating in trade fairs. We used to go to Ambiente, a huge event for consumer goods in Frankfurt. Now we prefer to attend those where tea and coffee is central, e.g. the annual Tea & Coffee World Cup (held alternately in Europe and Asia) and COTECA (a fair named after and dedicated to coffee, tea and cocoa).

The Tea & Coffee World Cup changes venue every year. Consequently, OXALIS has exhibited in Seville, Vienna, Krakow, Warsaw and Singapore. Our new stand debuted in September 2018 in Birmingham (UK), then hot-footed it to Hamburg for COTECA the following month.

A great boon to us in exporting goods is the aid we've received from Czech expats, examples being people in the UK, Hungary, Italy and Finland. Often women resident in the countries, they are already familiar with OXALIS and wish to influence tea culture in their chosen home and consider it a good way of doing business. Social media has also helped to spread the message, and lots of potential partners seek us out through such means or on the Internet. The stores in Prague have been particularly good for promoting the brand to people from outside the country. Finally, we try to pique interest elsewhere in the world by sending sample packs to recipients at selected addresses.

Exports have constantly risen and we aim to further this success. In 2008 to 2016, the volume more than doubled, contributing to overall turnover to the tune of 20%. Back in 2008, turnover in export equalled less than 23 million CZK, but by 2013 it had exceeded 37 million CZK. The following year it reached 40 million CZK. By 2017, the figure bordered on CZK 50 million.



Tea is packaged ready for sale to customers. It's sold from glass jars in our shops so people can sample the various aromas for themselves.

Tea accounts for 70% of all exports, although coffee is extending its share (15%), while accessories make up the remaining 15%. Overall, we export nearly 158 tonnes of tea and 26 tonnes of coffee annually (figures for 2017).

Standing out – marketing ourselves

After opening the shops and gaining a pool of wholesale clients, it was clearly going to be necessary to promote the company, since chance encounters by consumers or word-of-mouth wasn't sufficient to drive trade upwards. Moreover, OXALIS had to differentiate itself from competitors to win market share. Hence, the order of the day was to highlight the brand and conduct



marketing campaigns. Such endeavour was underpinned by the annual catalogue intended for circulation amongst existing and potential customers.

We've developed an approach to boosting sales through a mechanism of special promotions. Additionally, the company launched a newsletter. Entitled The Tea Leaf, it's seen several updates in style and is still published to inform customers of interesting facts and news related to tea and coffee culture. In 2005, once 15 shops had been established, a loyalty scheme was introduced offering several benefits. The programme known as "A free gift at 15 cups" has proven successful enough to last to this day. Following an upgrade to digital form, the loyalty scheme is now referred to as the OXALIS BONUS CLUB, which boasts a membership 60,000 strong.

A corporate logo is key to the visual presentation of any company. OXALIS's first one was created shortly after its foundation. Designed by Vratislav Špalek, it featured a cup of tea, a signifier of the core business, and a four-leaf clover designed as an X. It remained this way for almost 15 years before receiving its first facelift in the form of modified typography and removal of the cloverleaf for greater clarity.

Fashions perpetually shift and change in society and so do visual elements. One has been a trend for simplification in symbols. In response, in 2013 (also the company's 20th anniversary), we commissioned an agency to completely overhaul the OXALIS logo. Concurrently, a 70-page handbook on our corporate identity was produced, defining the various options, colours and ways the company's visual identifiers could be utilised. Some applications permit the logo to be accompanied by a tagline: The best in tea and coffee. Green has always been the firm's corporate colour, symbolising nature, peace and the inner spirit.



OXALIS' logo has evolved over the years.

With mass adoption of the Internet in the late 1990s, having a presence on the web was necessary to help promote products. Although websites had begun to appear back in the early 1990s, it was at the cusp of the noughties that they really caught on in the country, which is when OXALIS got into the game. The url www.oxalis.cz brought up our digital realm of loose leaf tea and plantation coffee, also comprising a wholesale e-shop. It underwent gradual improvement before an updated site was launched at the turn of 2004 and 2005. The purchase of an e-shop turnkey solution proved a significant milestone in this. Deployed in 2008, it completely fulfilled all the necessary requirements of staying up to date and functioning well. The introduction and development of English and Russian versions of the website also marked progress in this context. The same year witnessed cooperation with an agency for enhancing promotion on the Internet. As competition heated up online, the need arose to lend focus to OXALIS through search engines, paid campaigns and other emerging forms of publicity.

In parallel with gradual implementation of a new style of corporate identity in 2013, the website was similarly transformed. Presentation of the company was front and centre, while the online store was slightly sidelined. As demands by consumers rose, we extended services to meet them, such as setting up collection points for customers' parcels and facilitating online payment by debit and credit cards. An in-house Graphic Design Department was formed

in the same year so we could handle all such tasks previously assigned to third parties and agencies.

With the passing of time, the website from 2013 started to look a little outdated, and wasn't flexible enough to extend for other European markets. We approached Madeo, a digital agency based in nearby Zlín, with the request for a brand-new, up-to-date and attractive website. Over a year in development, it boasts functionality previously absent – advanced search options and filters, and it's automatically scalable for mobile devices.

The emergence of Facebook and social networking opened up the possibility for businesses to present themselves and communicate with customers differently. November 2011 marked the appearance of OXALIS' profile on Facebook, which now has tens of thousands of followers, so it has become an important channel for disseminating information. We've got separate profiles

OXALIS' stylish showroom.



in Czech for our Matcha green tea (Moje Matcha) and Ikona Coffee brands, as well as profiles for OXALIS in English and Slovakian. A later arrival on the scene – Instagram – has been widely adopted by young people, so our presence there as a company and the various sub-brands is a way of addressing this demographic, gaining several thousand followers along the way.

Currently, 5–6 million CZK is spent each year on marketing activities. One of the most important tools for this is the company's catalogue of products. This has grown from just a couple of sheets to a 100-plus-page publication. As previously mentioned, we also attend corporate events to promote OXALIS domestically and abroad. While a breadth of other activities exist to address consumers, too; e.g. promotional offers and contests.

No doubt the best advertisements for us are OXALIS retail outlets, which now number some 65 units (a combination of stores and franchise operations). The company's own shops can be found in every major town in the Czech Republic, particularly at busy shopping centres.

The stores have proven crucial in raising brand awareness and interest amongst consumers and boosting trade. Critical to making a sale is that every variety of flavoured tea is sold from our trademarked, hand-crafted glass jars. We also place coffee beans in glass jars, since customers seem to enjoy seeing the items they're purchasing being poured into the pack in front of them. In contrast, pure teas are stored in metal containers to ensure optimum conditions, i.e. total darkness and minimum exposure to air.

We've found that training shop assistants on a periodic basis has greatly benefited the retail network. Consequently, they are knowledgeable and adept at advising customers on what to buy, making each and every sale a very pleasant experience. Moreover, the company has been involved in charitable activities, which also help promote the brand. Rather than supporting projects very well publicised already, we've focussed on areas that somehow reflect aspects of the company or its range. A good



example is our collaboration with SMS – an organisation associating young people with multiple sclerosis. Tests have shown that drinking green tea contributes to the health of sufferers. Therefore, a percentage of sales generated by green tea is donated to this cause each year.

We've also worked with SOS Children's Villages. A drawing contest was put on for the youngsters under its care, and the three nicest pictures then appeared on mugs we sold, with some of the proceeds going back to the organisation.

In the past, children have received aid who come from India and Nepal, i.e. important nations in the supply of goods. The financial assistance went towards providing them with education and medical care.

OXALIS also supports projects local to its HQ. Examples include funding for the Zlín branch of the Czech Red Cross, as well as amateur theatre groups in nearby Hvozdná and Slušovice. We sponsor a very popular Easter-time custom in Zlín and other public events. Locally, we collaborated for two years with a long running film festival held in Zlín – the International Film Festival for Children and Youth.



Certificates of awards.



1999



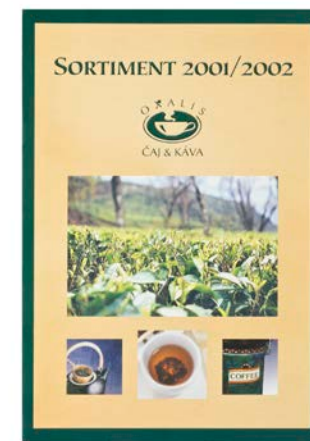
2002



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2000



2001



2006



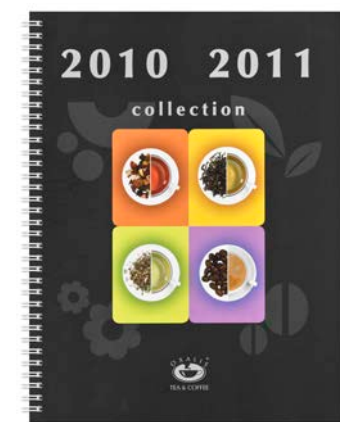
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2008



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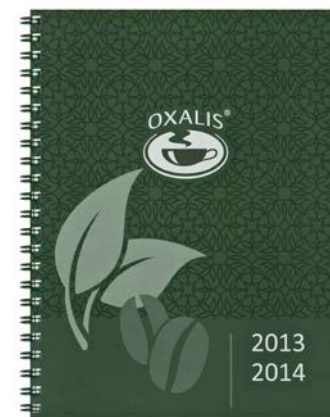
2015



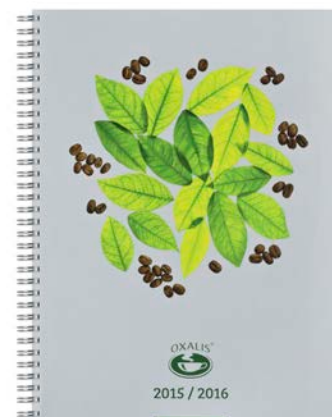
2016



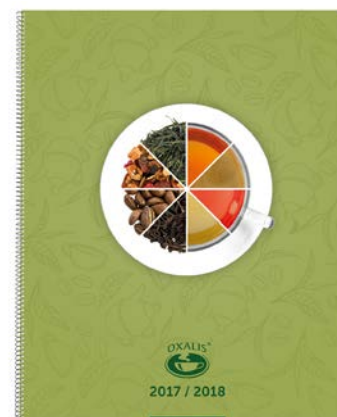
2017



2013



2015



2017

The newsletter ("The Tea Leaf") and the annual catalogue are some of the company's core marketing tools.

They've changed dramatically over the years, much like the rest of OXALIS.



PART 3

Visiting plantations, making friends,
gaining insight and experiencing
adventure.

~

The Republic of South Africa and its national beverage – Rooibos (March 2002)

Getting to the south of the continent was a long and tedious experience due to the enormous distance involved (13,000 km in my case). Despite spending over 13 hours in the aircraft, I crossed very few time zones in the process.

Prior to landing at its ultimate destination (Cape Town), the plane stopped off briefly in Johannesburg. The city is home to around five million people, its wealth largely derived from the nearby diamond and gold mines, although extreme poverty unlike anywhere in Europe is also witnessed. Crime is commonplace, sadly. A Dutch neighbour of mine recalled having a mobile phone stolen from his hand as he made a call in the street. In fact, it is not recommended to stop one's car at a crossroads or even a red light, since someone might enter it and try to steal it or demand cash.

The divide between rich and poor is evident when viewed from the sky above. Closest to Johannesburg's city centre are spacious colonial-style homes predominantly owned by white people, boasting perfect lawns, high outer walls and swimming pools, whereas the vast majority of the black populace either lives in the simple houses bordering them or the slums of corrugated iron on the very outskirts.

Leaving Johannesburg behind, the aircraft continued its flight, approaching Cape Town about 90 minutes later. A breath-taking experience, as a passenger on-board I was treated to spectacular views of the Cape of Good Hope and Table Mountain before the plane landed thanks to the good weather.

Cape Town is the capital of the province of the same name. Advanced economically speaking, it's certainly much safer than Johannesburg and often ranked as one of the most beautiful cities in the world by travellers. This was where my journey for Rooibos began.



Sowing Rooibos seeds; note how sandy the soil is.

I needed to travel north at some point to visit the Rooibos plantations, but I took in a trip to Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope first. From where I stood there was nothing between me and the Antarctic, just an open ocean rich in fauna. Although I couldn't observe the whales that would show up at a different time of the year, I was still able to see a large penguin colony.

Cape Town is surrounded by numerous vineyards – Paarl or Stellenbosch are two of the most famous areas renowned for the quality of their products. It just so happens that such excellent wine goes down well with the local (and very tasty) cuisine.

After spending some much needed downtime in Cape Town and its surroundings, my journey continued to the north along a nice tarmac road leading towards Namibia. The road was lined with carefully cultivated orchards and vineyards, and the sheer diversity in excellent fruit was immediately apparent. Two hours



later the party of travellers I was with arrived in the town of Clanwilliam, a distance of only 150 km, which is situated at the foot of the Cederberg mountains. The architecture of the town reflects the influence of the former British Empire, including a typical church. It was early March, the end of the summer in South Africa, when temperatures reach up to 36°C.

Clanwilliam lies in the very heart of the area where Rooibos is cultivated and traded. Although no reference to Rooibos had been made down in Cape Province or in any of the guide books I'd seen, Clanwilliam is full of signs of the trade to the extent that they can't be ignored, clearly marking it out as the epicentre of business in Rooibos.

The land around given over to the plantations – more than 350 of them – encompassed the surface area of just 200 x 20 km. Despite this, some 12.5 million Rooibos shrubs flourished there. Notably, it's the only place in the world where the plant has been grown successfully. Experiments at the same geographical latitude in Australia and South America haven't yielded any worthwhile harvest of it. The question as to why these surroundings alone are ideal for Rooibos has yet to be answered. By the time of my visit, production had been able to keep up with global demand, with the potential for double the capacity should it prove necessary. Consumption of the product has dramatically risen since, though, so it's hard to predict when demand might eventually outstrip supply.

The tour put on by Rooibos Ltd. was very well organised, starting with the nursery where initial cultivation of Rooibos shrubs took place. There, planting was a very simple procedure: rows were marked out in the (sandy and rather barren-looking) soil; the seeds were poured into an old drinks can into which a small hole had been cut; female employees walked almost endlessly along dropping the seeds into the rows through the holes in their cans; and then the seeds were loosely covered by the soil to encourage growth, with around half of them flourishing afterwards.

Rooibos shrubs are very resilient and adapt to the challenges of the local climate and soil present. They grow from seeds into shrubs

within three months, following which they are transplanted to plantations. Fascinatingly, any growth is evident as quickly as 3 days after seeding! The root fiercely asserts its position in the sandy soil in order to secure a maximum quantity of nutrients for itself, eventually reaching a depth of 4 to 5 metres in the process.

Again, the young shrubs are planted in long rows separated somewhat to create windbreaks, as blustery winds are common, alongside rows containing mature plants. Rooibos is harvested a full year after initial planting occurs, by which time the plant stands 80–100 cm high. If a shrub hasn't reached maximum size, twigs are cut off from the very top part towards the root, making it shorter by a fifth (exceptionally, a third) of its height. Harvesting involves the worker grabbing a bunch of twigs on the shrub and cutting them off with a sickle. The cuttings taken from two shrubs are put into a Hessian sack with a capacity of 15 kg, loaded onto

Twigs are harvested from Rooibos plants for a maximum of five years.



a trailer and eventually taken off-site by a tractor for further processing. Due to the climate and further losses during the harvest, the rate of yield is just 40%.

Each shrub is harvested for no more than five years, the twigs resembling those of conifers in Europe. With every harvest, a greater portion is cut away from the shrub by the picker. Since the plants rob the soil of valuable nutrients, it's necessary to remove them from the ground after such a time, following which the given area has to lay fallow for another five years to allow it to recover. The soil is very dusty, almost desert-like. Therefore, it's a miracle how Rooibos shrubs grow into beautiful green plants so rapidly.

Rooibos is harvested and processed in the period from December to mid-April, during the summer months when rain is scarce and temperatures vary between 30°C and 40°C. Notably, up to 95% of initial processing, including oxidation, occurs at individual farmsteads, while the remaining portion – more complicated treatment and preparation for shipment – happens at just a few sites. Before 1994, these operations were carried out by a single company – Rooibos Ltd., the one I visited. Founded in 1954 as a cooperative of several hundred farmers, it monopolised the export of the crop. This was brought to a close with the end of apartheid (racial segregation) in the country, resulting in greater freedoms in various respects. Five processing companies now exist that also hold export licenses, although Rooibos Ltd. retains the greatest market share.

I was privileged enough to see every stage of processing at Rooibos Ltd. There, the sacks are opened up and the twigs of Rooibos cleaned of dust and sand, as a lot of debris accumulates in the factory every day. Shortly afterwards, the cuttings are trimmed to a uniform length (approximately 30 centimetres) and then chopped into fragments of just a few millimetres. This step is fully automated, under the supervision of staff; three tonnes of fresh Rooibos pass through the sheltered workshop daily. The journey of the finely cut pieces continues along a conveyor belt to an open-air space, where they fall into a specially adapted trailer

with a tipping function. Once full, the tractor pulling it moves over a concrete surface in front of the workshop, dropping the contents of the trailer so an even pile is formed. At this point, the water content of the crop equals around 50%. Crushing and rolling take place next, opening up the cells. Water is sprinkled to raise the content to 60%, and each pile is left so the fine cuttings do not have access to air. This triggers the stage of oxidation in them, during which a change in colour takes place – from green to a copper-like red. At Rooibos Ltd., oxidation is always commenced between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. and it only takes 10–12 hours to complete.

With day-break, and the guarantee of sunshine and a hot day, comes the drying of the now oxidised but quite moist Rooibos. Mounds of it are created, spread out over a large stretch of concrete, which are left to the mercy of the unrelenting sun for 12 hours. By the evening, the level of moisture is nigh on perfect – a mere 5% to 8%. When asked about what would happen if it started to rain, the simple answer was that it never rained in the summer.

The mounds of oxidised, dried Rooibos are sucked up by a machine, then the pieces are sorted. Initially, coarse screening takes place, followed by separation into sixteen grades according to size and the amount of foreign matter. Afterwards, a period of fine grading results in designation under five eventual groups:

- ~ **Fine cut** (for making portioned teas)
- ~ **Fine cut + residual cuttings of twigs**, bright in colour (for portions of tea)
- ~ **Superior**, sold only domestically (loose rooibos)
- ~ **Super Grade**, intended for export, a similar quality as Superior (loose rooibos)
- ~ **Choice Grade**, contains more stems and woody matter (loose rooibos)

Separation with a focus on quality also occurs, especially in relation to the effectiveness of oxidation. Rooibos grown in areas of high





Loading up and moving the harvest of Rooibos to the factory for processing.

elevation is generally considered superior to that from lowland plantations, similar to orthodox teas.

It was interesting to see that the various plantations produced three different qualities of crop (the proportions of each are given in per cent): A – premium (5%); B – medium (70%); and C – low (25%). Since the three types are blended, the resulting product is always the same, the proportions of them dictating that “B” prevails over the others.

Returning to the stages of processing, it is necessary to sterilise the Rooibos due to it being prepared outdoors, as it could never meet strict hygiene standards in the developed world otherwise. For 90 seconds, steam (at 96°C) is blasted onto it to destroy germs and bacteria, although this increases the inherent level of moisture to around 15%. Therefore, 90 seconds of drying is required by another blasting operation.

The final stage constitutes packing the end product, whereby the Rooibos is fed into paper sacks to the weight of 18 kg each for distribution. A quantity is kept in reserve by the producer, equal to the entire season’s harvest in December to mid-April (approximately 8,000 tonnes). If stored correctly, it can last up to 10 years without diminishing in quality.

A journey to the cradle of tea (October 2005)

China. What a remarkable country it is, with a history of advanced civilisation stretching back aeons. It’s given the world silk and tea, and devised a sophisticated system for natural medicine, amongst other things. The most densely populated nation in the world, the economy of which has risen dramatically over the years, it’s home to magnificent natural phenomena and breath-taking historical monuments. All in all, that’s a whole lot of reasons to visit it.

I’d recommend going in the latter half of October, since its continental climate ushers in hot dry summers and hard winters, so autumn is milder with more pleasant weather. There’s also the advantage that it’s a period free of Chinese festive celebrations, so the streets aren’t overly full with people.

My journey started out in the most populous city – Shanghai. After a stopover at the old-fashioned airport in Moscow, a subsequent flight of eight hours brought me to Shanghai’s contrastingly ultra-modern one. I travelled to the city centre by an above ground railway track called Maglev. Shortly after setting off, a display showed the speed of the train – 430 km per hour! Signs of economic growth were visible at first glance, especially in the form of the huge Pudong industrial estate on the right bank of the River Yangtze, which only came into existence in the 1990s. New skyscrapers cluster along its outer perimeter, viewed as a whole by the Chinese residents as an spectacular contemporary landmark. The busiest street – Nanjing – lies nearby, illuminated



every night more than any European counterpart and thronging with happy-looking people whatever the hour. The roads around heave with a mix of luxurious limousines and vehicles of an older vintage, topped off by cyclists tooting the horns on their bikes as merrily as the drivers. No-one pays much heed to any of it, though, and even the act of stopping at red traffic lights seems rather advisory than compulsory. All this hustle and bustle continues unabated, and it's as if the individuals making up this mass of humanity are aware that they WILL reach their destination, no matter what. This smoothly functioning chaos felt positive to me; simply, there were no reasons for feeling any sense of exasperation.

Tea shops were quite rare in the city centre, although a few fancy ones dotted the streets; for example, Ten Fu on Nanjing.

A busy street in Shanghai.



Instead, I sought out a renowned one on the bank of the River Yangtze in the park of Huangpu. Resembling a small gym in floorspace, the choice of purely Chinese products on offer was incredible, my heart leaping at the wealth of rarities on display. There, buyers were unfamiliar with fruit infusions and flavoured varieties, and appeared amply satisfied by the types of tea produced domestically.

Around two kilometres south west from Nanjing is a site where the traditional meets the contemporary in Shanghai. Yu Garden houses classic, centuries-old Chinese structures with curving rooflines, set against a backdrop of the high-rise towers of Pudong, making for a slightly peculiar juxtaposition. A number of small, old shops there sell everything under the sun, where people stand outside the doorways in order to drum up custom. Restaurants and food outlets are abundant, even including a branch of Starbucks.

Despite the plethora of tea shops that exist, the choice is often modest and usually includes chinaware. Interestingly, jars on the counters show manually rolled tea in striking shapes undergoing infusion in water. These can look like roses, balls, spindles, bee hives and so on, allowing customers to view how they open up.

In this rather otherworldly locale, I came across a monumental tea house that begged to be entered! The interior and its atmosphere really transported me back to a bygone time. Probably the oldest in Shanghai, photographs revealed the prominent visitors that had passed inside over the years, amongst them a smiling Margaret Thatcher. Its staff recommended a Mao Feng of superb quality, which was brought to me in a glass by a stylishly dressed young lady. The leaves floated on the surface and gradually dropped to the bottom; surprisingly there was no strainer or pouring involved. In addition, I was given three tiny eggs of unknown origin. The atmosphere was wonderful and the setting perfect, but I didn't really feel the need to eat eggs with the tea...

I had to move on from this metropolis of 13 million residents. Getting up early to ensure I travelled the 40 kilometres to the



airport in time, I left my accommodation at 5 a.m., dragging my heavy suitcase to the nearest underground station. Unfortunately, I then learnt that the first train departed no earlier than at 6.20 a.m.! Returning to the empty street above, I eventually managed to hail a taxi instead. Luckily, things had turned in my favour, permitting me to head for the former British enclave of Hong Kong.

It was immediately apparent to me that the people of Hong Kong looked different. Their expressions reflected the decades of capitalism that had required them to live independently and provide for themselves, while those in mainland China still largely showed tendencies of collective thought associated with communism. The cars drove on the left, as is the habit in the UK, and every square centimetre of the streets had been utilised to the utmost. Roads had split levels, with another one placed above the street, built on pillars. The buses and, uniquely, trams were double-deckers, in order to carry as many passengers as possible through the narrow streets.

The highest hill above the town – Peak – can be reached in a few minutes by taking a cog-wheel railway. The view it affords of the skyscrapers in Victoria Bay is amazing. Fun fact: a show involving their lights is put on every evening at 8 p.m. and set to stylish music. Spectators fill the bank on the Avenue of Stars to watch the beams of light.

Hong Kong's tea culture differs slightly to that of mainland China. Speciality shops are quite rare, and they primarily stock Chinese teas, but Oolong from Taiwan crops up more often. Domestically made ceramic items are available alongside high quality Japanese porcelain.

It's possible to buy tea in the streets from vendors who prepare it large, pear-shaped vessels. The tea is then poured into lidded cups on the counter.

Not far from the island of Hong Kong lies another island – Lantau. Its atmosphere was far calmer when I was there, but its allure was beginning to attract tourism. At its centre stands a

small Buddhist village that boasts a colossal statue of Buddha – the biggest bronze one in the open air.

My next destination was Wuhan in Hubei Province, a smaller city of 7 million inhabitants. A major port in central China, it's located on the banks of the third longest river in the world, the River Yangtze. The city was developing rapidly. For instance, 150 new cars were sold every day (50,000 annually), so it suffered from heavy smog. The standard of living was on the rise and consumerism ruled. Paying a visit to the local “tea quarter” proved fascinating, as numerous speciality shops lined the streets. Despite neighbouring each other, every one was doing business. In addition to items typically sold in the province, dealers always stocked something unusual to differentiate themselves from their competitors.



In mountain regions,
tea is still picked in
the traditional
manner.

A highlight for me was a tasting session of Chinese and Taiwanese Oolong that had been very recently harvested in the autumn – the very best! Amongst the finest were long-leaved Da Hun Gao and rough-leaved Dong Fang Mei Ren, the latter veering on black tea in taste. It came as no surprise to see King of Tit Kuan Yin crowned as the absolute winner, the asking price being a staggering USD 170 per kilo. Nevertheless, it's a fantastic tea, the likes of which one's palate can never forget.

The following day, I left polluted Wuhan to take in tea plantations in the Himalayas, a journey of 300 km eastwards. The party I was travelling with stopped by the dam known as “Three Gorges”, where the world's largest hydro-power station was nearing completion. Enormous in scale, it was being built to generate 11% of the county's electricity, requiring the flooding of a 200 kilometre valley and relocation of several million residents.

After a few dozen kilometres, we reached our destination – a landscape of rolling hills at the elevation of 800 meters. The green vegetation on the hillsides was distinctly that of tea plants. The rather archaic but functional processing factory for the tea was not operating at the plantation, as the harvest had ended in the summer. Three types of green tea were produced there – Xia Zhou Bi Feng, San Xia Mai Tian and the well-known China Chun Mee, plus one black tea – Congou Black tea. The site represented the only processing unit within an area of 20 square km that bought tea from local farmers. We visited such a farmer, whose tea bushes were exemplarily – identical in size and arranged in regular geometric rows; the average age of the plants was 15 years. Standing there in the crystal clear air, I took in the spectacular views of the valley, savouring the scent of the young tea leaves. A moment that would stay with any true enthusiast. Alas, the day slowly came to an end, forcing me to leave this idyll and return to industrial Wuhan, where I boarded an aircraft en-route to Beijing.

Sampling coffee below Volcán Barú (March 2010)

In December 2009, I accepted an invitation to visit coffee plantations and processing plants in Panama. After taking care of the formalities, I set off for San José, Costa Rica, in the following March. Just an hour's flight away from the capital is San José de David, a city in the west of Panama, which borders an area considered a coffee grower's paradise referred to as Boquete, below the Barú volcano. There, I spent a wonderful week that turned my notions of coffee and coffee culture upside down.

Panama stretches between the two continents over the Isthmus of Panama – the narrowest portion of Central America. The narrow

The area's coffee plantations are sure to enchant anyone.



strip of land links more than the two continents, as it traverses distinct divisions in social and cultural life. Those living at the Panama end typically stick to the traditions of the past, while inhabitants in the opposite part seek modernity and economic growth. Spanish is the official language, so the dominant one, although English is frequently spoken, especially in major cities. With a population of over three million, roughly a third live in poverty, and a quarter of its residents have to get by on less than USD 1 per day. Nevertheless, one receives a warm welcome throughout the country.

Half of the landmass comprises lowlands. The highest mountain range is Sierra de Veraguas, home to its highest mountain – Volcán Barú, a volcano. The coastline along the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean is dotted with numerous islets, over one thousand of them. Five hundred rivers flow through Panama and most of the country is forested. It has a pleasant tropical climate, the average temperature being 26°C.

The majority of Panamanians (65%) are of mixed-race – a combination of the indigenous population and Spaniards. A surprising 10% of the population is of Chinese descent, followed by those of Spanish and African origin. Just 6% comprises native American Indians. Columbus landed on Panama's shores in 1502, and it remained a Spanish colony for the following three centuries, after which it fell under the dominion of Peru and Colombia.

Due to its strategic position in the American continent between the Pacific and Atlantic, it quickly became a hub for trade. Initially, a road ran between the oceans, later replaced by a railway, and ultimately the famous Canal, which dates from the 1870s. The expensive works were started by the French, but had proven financially unsustainable by the early twentieth century. Panama was then part of an independent Colombia, a country experiencing political turmoil which displeased America, ultimately leading to Panama's independence in 1903;

the rights to and obligations for the Canal subsequently passed to the USA.

Unfortunately, constructing the earlier railway and later Canal caused a huge number of workers to die of malaria and yellow fever. Even so, the 81.6 kilometre Canal was completed in 1914. Decades later, in 1979, its administration passed to Panama, with the provision that the USA could still control the passage of ships and defend the Canal militarily, an agreement which was annulled on 1st January, 2000.

Welcome to Boquete! A town with 15,000 residents, it is tucked away in the foothills of Panama's highest mountain – Volcán Barú (3,474 m). The local coffee is unique and one of the finest on the planet. In Spanish, boquete means a gap or opening, which is what greedy gold miners dubbed the place in the late

Ripe coffee cherries. The unique microclimate is the reason for the high quality of the locally grown coffee.



19th century when looking for a short cut to the Pacific Ocean. Boquete is now an important centre for tourism in the province of Chiriquí, and an incredibly popular location to retire to.

It's the pleasant climate and favourable exchange rate of the official currency (the balboa) that's convinced a few thousand retired Americans to up-sticks and settle there. While some get into cultivating coffee, encouraging tourism or trading in real estate, others seem content to walk their dogs and drink margaritas. Like other parts of Latin America, there are essentially two seasons – a period of drought, referred to as summer in midNovember to March, and one of rain.

It's the very special microclimate that allows the town to grow spectacular coffee. Lying slap-bang between two major oceans helps. From the Caribbean coastline, it's approximately 60 kilometres as the crow flies to Boquete, placing it equidistant from the Pacific Ocean. Add in the active volcano verging on 3,500 meters, rich volcanic soil and the extreme elevation of most plantations, and a terrific terroir is guaranteed. The meteorological cherry on the cake is what the locals call Bahareque – a misty haze that usually turns into light rain on an almost daily basis in the summer. Usually, it's caused by the collision of weather fronts directly above the volcano that travel inland from the opposing oceans.

No matter how favourable the climate, it's not the be-all and end-all for growing great coffee. The relatively small territory available to farmers in Boquete – in the world's smallest coffee-growing nation – meant that the quality of the crop had to be paramount. Indeed, a single farm in Panama even managed to change the entire system of trade around premium coffee. The majority of locals tend plants of superior varieties, such as Typical, Cathay, San Ramon, Pac Amara and, more recently, the popular Geisha/Gesha.

Often, coffee is processed by the wet method, which involves fermenting coffee cherries in water. However, alternative manners are on the rise, notably innovations like honey and pulped natural.

Clearly, it's no easy task to harvest and transport coffee cherries every day from an elevation of 2,000 m on rough clay roads. A key advantage of the honey process, other than lending a very interesting flavour profile (resembling the highly sweet fruitiness of the best dry-processed coffees from Ethiopia), is the cost effectiveness of it. Quite simply, the coffee cherries are dried on raised beds for about 2 weeks, until the moisture in them falls to 10.5%. There's no need for a single drop of water!

Such economies prove crucial in Panama, where most of the indigenous population (Ngöbe-Buglé) depend on the coffee harvest for their livelihoods. The honey method allows the farmers they work for to produce a high-quality crop for subsequent sale at a very favourable price, all the while utilising a minimum of resources. In Boquete, Ngöbe Indians make up 95% of all of pickers on the plantations. They usually live on the farm in huts provided for them. Extremely nice people, typically modest and friendly, the Ngöbe follow a unique path in life. They create beautiful clothes, notably those worn by every Ngöbe girl and woman.

Another advantage of the same method is that the coffee cherries can be dried directly on the farm. They are transferred from baskets into plastic buckets (latas) of 19 litres each for gauging the quantity picked. The Ngöbe earn 1 to 3 dollars for each lata according to the variety and how well they harvested the crop.

Most farmers agree that selectively picking the coffee is crucial to everything that follows. If the cherries aren't ripe enough, an astringent and negatively acidic tone is evident in the cup. However, too ripe and an unpleasant vinegary taste comes through. Moreover, in extremely hot weather, the freshly picked cherries have to be placed indoors immediately, otherwise there's a risk of spoiling the crop through unwanted fermentation, just like with wine.

Processing via the more common wet method is demanding in its own right, through the volume of water utilised and the technical facilities needed. No normal farmer is able to carry this out themselves, forcing them to either sell their coffee cherries





Selectively picking coffee cherries is no simple matter – it takes skill.

or pay a flat rate for processing them in a large factory. The latter also means that complete control of quality is handed over to a third party. In such a case, the hope is the fermentation tanks are freshly cleaned and the system has been flushed out of any dregs.

In essence, the honey method is very primitive, necessitating just a press and a shelling machine. What marks it out is its feasibility and minimal financial expenditure. The complete absence of water is the primary advantage, permitting processing directly on the farm. Otherwise, there'd be a need to transport the raw crop dozens of kilometres every day to a beneficio (processing plant), obviously pushing costs up.

The better farms use African-style raised beds for drying coffee. The bamboo they're made from is commonplace

throughout Boquete and on every farm. One difference, though, is that an artificial cloth is laid on the bed, unlike Hessian sacking which is normal in Africa. At night, the beans are wrapped in cloth and covered with polythene film so they are exposed as little as possible to variations in humidity. At rather low elevations, the sweetness of the fermenting cherries attracts pests in the form of insects, but this isn't an issue at settings of 1,800 m above sea level.

It's not all plain sailing, though, which is why the honey method is rarely adopted. After being spread on the beds, the cherries need to be turned several times a day. The only way to do it is by hand without such luxuries as wooden rakes or tools. Quite fun to begin with, it soon becomes a challenge once the beds are loaded with several hundred kilograms of the fruit in the roasting sunshine. If the moist and sticky coffee cherries, which are sugary to the touch, are left unturned, they adhere to one another and start to rot from the bottom. This could result in the entire batch being spoilt, the reason why the method is considered quite risky. If something goes wrong, the coffee in the cup might feature an unpleasant, extremely sweet tone bordering on rotten fruit. Get it right, though, and the result has the potential to be truly unique.

The best honey coffee possesses a rather fine acidity and is simpler than the wet-processed form. Although highly individual in flavour profile, a typical example will usually boast great sweetness with tones of cherry, raisin, prune and ripe forest fruit. Honey coffee stands out even in its raw state due to its distinct aroma of, well, honey. In contrast, normal green beans have virtually no such discernible characteristic. Additionally, the option exists to treat the leftover cherry to make cascara – the basis for a tea-like beverage.

Near the border of Panama and Costa Rica, west of Volcán Barú, stood the Hartmann farm (or finca in Spanish), situated in a great rainforest in a picturesque valley. This veritable Eden was where



I spent the penultimate day of my stay, and a real highlight it was, too. The farm was founded in 1940 by the son of a Czech man – a Moravian called Alois Stražil, who adopted his German wife's name of Hartmann. He'd settled in Panama, in 1912, moving to the (then) new town of Volcán. He led a colourful life: active in the anti-US movement, he was imprisoned in New York and fathered 15 children! Knowledgeable about the region and archaeology, he even worked as a correspondent for the National Geographic Magazine in the 1950s, passing away in 1970 at the age of 78. At the time of my visit, his eldest son was in charge of the farm. He was clearly proud of his Czech roots, as evident in the sampling room, which he'd adorned with a Czech flag and numerous examples of local fauna.

Rolling beans on bamboo grates is an important part of the process.



As for the farm itself, it was equipped for processing by the wet and honey methods, replete with shaded, raised beds for the latter. Everything was very well organised and extremely clean and tidy. The immediate surroundings comprised banana trees and tropical vegetation, the sounds of birds filled the air (Panama is home to around 1,000 species) and strangely sized creepy crawlies and butterflies busied themselves. In fact, my host had been bitten three times by tarantulas and seemed none the worse for it. Interestingly, a skin of a jaguar decorated the farmhouse, an old hunting trophy of his father's.

Following a typical Panamanian lunch (steak served with plantain chips), we set about sampling his wonderful coffee. The famous arabica variety of Geisha grew there, which gave great sweetness in the cup with tones of forest fruit, tangerine and papaya and an aftertaste of bergamot. Such exotic nuances, so often overlooked by consumers, were a complete revelation to me, as was the energising effect it gave.

Later, we travelled to mountains in the direction of Costa Rica in an off-road vehicle, our destination being the plantations on their slopes. The soil profile, altitude and an almost ever-present mist created ideal conditions for cultivating superb coffee. With no-one around for miles, we were all alone in the seemingly endless fields of coffee plants, except for the local wildlife, of course.

The greenery was all encompassing. One plantation was given over to the Geisha variety, where the plants had grown to the extent that ladders were sometimes needed; such high altitudes are ideal for the Geisha variant. Enchantingly, the plantations gave off a pleasant aroma similar to jasmine. Sheer paradise.

Turning back to the valley, I was told the family owned two empty buildings in the rainforest, several hours walk from the nearest settlement. They rented them out to people seeking a retreat from the outside world. The idea appealed to me – a relaxing week spent in thought, experiencing the area's natural



beauty in total isolation. Alas, the week had flown by and it was time to head back home.

Bidding “Adios!” to Panama, I took the bus to the airport in San José, Costa Rica. Following an extremely thorough check for drugs, the plane passed over the Dominican Republic en-route to Frankfurt, where winter was ebbing away. I may have left tropical Panama far behind, but the impression it and the amazing coffee had made on me lingered long.

Pu erh from Simao, China (May 2011)

Yunnan Province sits in south-west China, and is four times larger than my homeland of the Czech Republic. It's rich in natural resources and one of the agricultural centres of the world. China is estimated to be home to 30,000 species of plants, the Province boasting 18,000 of them. It's also where 25 of the country's 56 various ethnic groups live, so people 50 miles from each other can speak totally different languages. Of greater importance to this publication, it constitutes an important area for Chinese tea. The wider surroundings of Simao, referred to as Pu'er (or Pu Erh/ Pu-Erh/Pu-erh), are the source of the well-known tea of the same name.

I received an invitation to go on a tour of the Province in mid-May, when Pu Erh harvesting was at its height. Flying involved twenty-four hours of travel: from Prague to Paris to Beijing to Kunming (the capital of Yunnan Province and a hub for Tibet, Sichuan, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam) and the final hop of one hour to Simao, arriving in the evening.

A city of 200,000 inhabitants, its environs were given over to tea plantations. However, the trees responsible for Pu Erh still remained a four-hour drive away to the south, close by Myanmar. The land we passed through was agricultural and mountainous, bordering the River Mekong. Surprisingly, though, the roads were several carriageways wide and of very high quality, so the Chinese



Peak harvest season in mid-May.

authorities clearly didn't mind spending money on infrastructure even in remote areas. Despite such signs of modernity, the lives of the locals had changed little, in stark contrast to the urbanites in the vast cities to the east.

The excursion's first major stop allowed us to take in an orchard on the mountain ridge. It contained tea trees about four metres in height with beautiful, large leaves, some of which were said to be five centuries old. Densely planted amongst them were tea bushes displaying equally healthy leaves. My hosts explained that Pu Erh made from the old trees was considered superior than from the young shrubs.

Next we were taken to what I can only describe as a sea of green in a landscape of unbounded tea plantations. The sensation was magical – the endless sweep of the leaves and their captivating scent were a balm for the soul after so much travel.



Description was given about a nearby plant, one used for white Pu Erh, from which only the very youngest buds are picked. This takes place early in the morning and ceases at around 10 a.m., before the buds open in the strong sunlight and slowly transform into leaves. Even so, the challenge faced is that the harvested buds are quite moist, and it requires eight kilograms of them to produce just one kilogram of end product. To give a sense of scale, for conventional black tea the ratio is a more advantageous 4:1. Nevertheless, the favourable climate allows such harvesting to be repeated every ten to fifteen days.

Moving on, we passed coffee plantations that had recently been introduced. China had seen an upswing in demand for the beverage and Yunnan was quick to respond. 60,000 hectares of land had been dedicated to growing only the superior arabica variety, which was expected to increase tenfold over the following five years.

We ordered a pot of green tea to accompany our generous lunch, the leaves in it just floating freely. No sense was given as to the duration of infusion or temperature of the water. Simply, the leaves remained inside and the pot was topped up with hot water as and when necessary, in complete contrast to the far stricter habits of other nations – the first of several cultural differences I observed.

Afterwards, we visited the facilities of a few tea producers back in the valley. It was fascinating to see the extreme degree of commitment and admirable skills demonstrated by the employees. Each facility specialized in one type of tea, but the basic equipment used for processing leaves were common to all, such as meshes for wilting, steaming drums, rollers, drying lines and graders.

I witnessed the painstaking work involved in making “jade rings”. Unbelievably, each individual tea leaf was rolled by hand around a needle! In total, twenty workers could produce just fifteen kilograms of the tea a day. Elsewhere, Pu Erh was compressed into the standard shapes of bricks or cakes.

Interestingly, one producer had decided to form it into what liked like bars of chocolate. The tea was pushed into a mould manually, along with any decorative elements like blooms of flowers, then it was pressed in a device for ten minutes.

A Pu Erh sampling event was hosted by another tea producer. Just like one for wine, we attendees were offered older vintages to try. Age is discerned by the colour of the cake, indicating the extent of oxidation, while delicacy in taste is the trait of older examples, which can fetch high prices domestically. Interestingly, hardly anything of value is exported since collectors are willing to spend money on Pu Erh like others do on French wine. As an illustration, in 1997, Pu Erh moulded in the shape of a nest and the size of a human fist sold for 200 EUR! A poster on the wall showed a mighty tea tree 5,000 years old, begging the question how much Pu Erh would cost made from its leaves.

There are over three hundred more such producers in Simao alone, while tens of thousands might exist in China. That’s why we at OXALIS appreciate the cooperation we have with experts in the country, who source tea from suppliers on our behalf. Trade would certainly be far harder without their knowledge of local circumstances.

Returning to the tour, the territory’s main technologist was introduced. He didn’t own a plantation or production facility, instead he acted as a consultant on various procedures for processing tea and oversaw compliance with them. Considering the fact that dozens of varieties of tea were produced, each very different in the approach required, his work was highly valued. He described how the tea industry was constantly in flux.

A decade ago a picker on the plantation was paid merely 20 CNY daily (equal to 43 USD per month), it’s now four times more (173 USD). Since this is still less than the average income, people are tempted to move away to the industrial east. Hence, there’s a shortage of workers, who are moved around from plantation





A tea-tasting session is a kind of special ritual. Rare and older examples of Pu Erh never leave the country.

to plantation according to the harvest. Whenever there's a rise in the price of labour, the price of tea goes up. Moreover, along with improvement in the standard of living for the Chinese, demand for tea domestically is greater than ever. Another unfortunate factor in this is climate change, manifested by drought or flooding. Indeed, a week after my visit, Yunnan Province was hit by the worst floods of the previous ten years.

Leaving Simao behind, we headed to Wuhan, a metropolis in Hubei Province straddling the banks of the mighty River Yangtze. Another tea-tasting session ensued, where we sampled numerous teas from across the nation. Personally, this involved selecting types to buy for OXALIS' upcoming season. The

assortment was astounding, truly varied in flavour profile, making it extremely hard to choose only a few examples.

Finally, I visited the large Buddhist temple of Guiyuan and a major landmark of the city – Yellow Crane Tower. At the close of the trip, I felt so much more knowledgeable about Chinese tea culture (and slightly relieved to be getting back to normality).

Gems grow in Darjeeling (June 2012)

The awe with which tea lovers look upon Darjeeling is something akin to how wine enthusiasts think of Bordeaux and Champagne. I'd long dreamed of visiting the region, but I'd never managed to set anything up. Eventually, in the late spring of 2012, I was able to fulfil my long-held ambition with two customers as travel companions.

We stopped off in Dubai on the way to Calcutta. Known for its prosperity, it also turned out to be a highly organised place. It boasts the world's tallest building, the largest shopping centre with a thousand stores, palaces, mansions, luxury cars and residents from 150 nations. This was where we spent a night.

Talk about a contrast. We took off from one of the wealthiest cities in the world to land in Calcutta, West Bengal. They're like chalk and cheese. The Bengal capital is home to 5 million people, with another 13 million inhabiting its surroundings. In fact, it only takes up 185 km², and the sheer concentration of people is tangible – they're literally everywhere. Indeed, the locals seem quite happy to sleep at night on the bodywork of a car, or a roof or the pavement, so caution is required not to step on anyone in the dark.

The city pulsates with life around the clock. Chaiwalas (street vendors) are commonplace, selling chai – spiced black tea with milk. So, we stopped at one to try it out, and it was delicious. Surprisingly, the milk hadn't gone off in the heat (about 40°C),



even though it was stored out in the open. None of us suffered from anything untoward afterwards, I'm pleased to say. No doubt European public health authorities wouldn't hesitate to close them all down, though...

Beyond the colourful street life, Calcutta has another face solely accessible by certain castes – luxurious restaurants, traditional British-style clubs and well-maintained sports facilities, indicative of the diametric differences that exist. We weren't in Calcutta just to sightsee, oh, no. Our business partner's tasting rooms and offices were located in one of its tallest high-rise buildings, and it happens to be the hub of the tea business in India, home to the vast majority of sellers and the country's most important auction centre. We arrived during the time of the second harvest, and were privileged to attend a sampling event with dozens of teas.

The next stage of our journey took us to the Himalayan foothills and the far smaller town of Bagdogra. We clambered into an off-road vehicle and headed for the mountains along a narrow mountain road of worsening quality. We passed by low-level plantations and others with recognised names such as Castleton, Makaibari, Jungpana and Goomtee, then the densely populated city of Kurseong – the start of the famous narrowgauge railway to Darjeeling. We reached our destination after four hours and were greeted by Rajiv Kumar – a manager at one of the famous plantations, Risheehat. He'd held the position for several years, with the job-related perk of living on-site in a spacious colonial house with his family and several servants. He'll have to give it up when he eventually chooses to leave the plantation.

It was possible to appreciate Risheehat in all its glory the following beautiful morning. The house stood at the very top, above a swathe of well-tended tea shrubs running down through three valleys. The tea plants were intentionally overshadowed by tall trees to prevent exposure to sharp sunlight.

We initially explored an area of century-old tea shrubs. The female pickers put the leaves into baskets they carried on their backs, filling two or three of them every day. It took about six days for fresh leaves to grow. The plantation and adjacent tea factory employed 970 people, evidence that the tea industry was the major employer of the region. The workers earned between 2 and 5 US dollars a day, depending on their performance. Despite the seemingly low wages, it afforded them a respectable standard of living. Moreover, the employees enjoyed special social benefits, including subsidised education and health services. Their children attending the neighbouring school looked untroubled and optimistic.

A plantation stretching out across a hillside.



The plantation was certified as organic, and utilised a natural fertilizer based on a special grass from a nearby field. The Chinese type of shrub predominated, grown from seed, while 10% of the shrubs were designated as Clonal (a variety ideal for the given terroir) propagated through cuttings.

Definition of terroir: The cumulative effect of the particular natural conditions of an agricultural site, resulting in a unique and unmistakable crop. Primarily, it's affected by the local geological subsoil, composition of the soil, humidity, precipitation, elevation, agricultural method and the skills of the grower. (Adapted from an entry in Wikipedia).

The associated processing plant did everything in-house, allowing us to view their entire procedure for producing tea. Wilting the freshly picked leaves was the first stage, beginning at around 5 p.m. without the need for heating equipment. At midnight, hot air was blown into the facility. Rolling commenced at 6 a.m., whereby rolling machinery compressed the leaves to release the inherent moisture, permitting oxidation.

For the second harvest, oxidation takes 2.5 to 3 hours, while first flush leaves (the first harvest) only require 20–25 minutes. That's why first flush teas appear bright green in hue but are still classified as black tea. The tea master is the one responsible for judging the exact moment oxidation is complete, directly impacting the quality of the end product.

The stage of drying followed under heated air; first flushes were dried for 16 minutes, whereas the second harvest necessitated 24 minutes. Sorting was next, scheduled from 8 a.m. till 5 p.m., thereby grading the leaves as whole leaf, broken or fannings (small pieces). Finally, the batch was tasted and gauged for appearance, being considered classic muscatel, china muscatel or rare kakra muscatel.

All of this takes merely 24 hours. The Risheehat plantation produces 1.2 to 1.5 tonnes of high-quality tea in total.

In the early morning of the next day we visited Tiger Hill, a peak towering over the city of Darjeeling, normally affording spectacular views of the Himalayas at sunrise, including Kanchenjunga – the highest mountain in India. The excursion lasted over three hours, but it was spoiled by heavy fog, so us hikers could only see a distance of about twenty metres. So we didn't hang around, but a poster at the bus stop showed us what we'd missed.

As for the city of Darjeeling, we dropped by the capital of the district in the afternoon. Its name derives from Tibetan – dorje (lightning) and ling (place). It only boasted 100 inhabitants in 1835, but that soon changed after the local governor, Campbell, started experimenting with tea seedlings in Beechwood garden. By 1875, the number of residents had risen dramatically to more than 100,000! How so? Well, in 1852, the first three commercial gardens were established: Tukvar, Steinthal and Aloobari. Just 20 years later, 113 tea gardens were dotted around the area.

Some interesting stats from the time of my visit: 7 valleys around Darjeeling city contained 87 plantations, encompassing 17,500 hectares; 52,000 people had regular employment in the tea industry, with an additional 15,000 taking temporary positions, making it crucial to the local economy and the largest employer.

The tour took in two more gardens, the first of these being Singbulli. Inhabiting the slope of a mountain, it produced black teas of all harvests as well as Oolong. Certified as an organic garden, it possessed top-tier equipment.

The other, Balasun, was located in a deep valley with a breathtaking view and produced conventional tea; it neighboured well-known plantations such as Margaret's Hope, Phuguri and Ambootia. In addition to the Clonal and Chinese varieties (variants of plant), the large-leaf Assam shrub was grown (containing fewer active substances); the end product was destined for the contents of tea bags.

We moved on to Bagdogra in what was now mid-June. The monsoon rains were set to arrive soon afterwards, which enrich the soil. We observed sand bags outside homes in Darjeeling,





The district of Darjeeling is as respected by tea enthusiasts as the Champagne wine region is by wine lovers.

protecting them from the anticipated flood water. With one more night in Calcutta before our departure home, we reflected on the colourful (albeit rather short) experience it'd been. Certainly, the lure of India made us wish to return sometime in the future.

Ethiopia - the cradle of coffee (November 2013)

Early in the month, I joined owners of cafes in west and north Europe to visit Ethiopia and see for myself how coffee was harvested and processed. The party flew from Berlin to Istanbul and then to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Later, the itinerary would take in the former province of Sidamo and district of Yirgacheffe.

One of the poorest nations in the world, its population totals (at the time of print) around 102 million, comprising approximately 70 ethnic groups. The two main religions practised are Christianity, which came very early to the country, and Islam. The cradle of mankind, archaeologists have dated a stone tool discovered there as 2.5 million years old.

Other notable aspects:

- ~ It's only been a colony once, under Italian occupation in 1936–1941.
- ~ The locals don't have surnames, instead adopting the first name of their mother or father as the one following their forname.
- ~ Postal addresses are limited solely to the number, without adding the names of streets or squares.
- ~ It has a unique calendar - twelve months of thirty days each, plus a 13th month of five days; it runs 7 years and 8 months behind the Gregorian calendar.
- ~ Amharic is the official language of the country - the sole African language with a written form.



- ~ It boasts the only natural formation visible with the naked eye from outer space – The Great Rift Valley, containing lakes surrounded by beautiful national parks.
- ~ It's the birthplace of coffee; the former province of Kaffa is believed to be where humans first used and cultivated coffee plants, also bestowing the drink with its name.

In the local language, bun or buna are equivalents for coffee. It seems likely that the English term coffee bean is derived from the Ethiopian kaffa bun. The folk legend goes that a young shepherd named Kaldi was watching over his goats, which – to his great surprise – became very active after grazing on coffee leaves and cherries. He shared this information with others, and the resultant beverage rapidly gained in popularity. Producing coffee is now key to the Ethiopian economy. Roughly 25% of the population is dependent on its cultivation, whether directly or indirectly. The nation is the seventh largest producer of coffee globally, half of the end product being consumed domestically, while 10% of the GDP comes from export.

Anyway, back to Addis Ababa, a relatively recent city founded in 1886. In Amharic, its name means 'new flower', relating to the newness of the place. Situated at an elevation of about 2,500 m, it's the third highest capital city in the world.

We stayed there for two days, and the rather thin air made me feel as if I was floating and slightly lackadaisical. First off, the tour took us to a processing facility – the Coffee Processing and Warehouse Enterprise (CPWE), where coffee intended for export was treated. The crop was cleaned, sorted, professionally tasted, classified according to quality, carefully packaged and stored. Restrictions existed on the organisations that could export since the government had issued just 200 licences, but in reality only 50 of them were in use.

We then popped by an institution known as the Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECEX). Much like a regular stock exchange, a battle was in progress between coffee producers and purchasers, one seeking to maximize their profits and the other battling to keep purchase prices low, applying the latest data (splashed across screens) from the Coffee, Sugar and Cocoa Exchange in New York as the basis for their dealings.

Ethiopia is the country that gave coffee to the world.
A lot of work goes into every cup.



In contrast, the evening was given over to watching a performance of folk theatre. The hall was packed, the atmosphere relaxed and the artistic endeavours moving. We partook of the popular Ethiopian meal of injera, a sour-tasting pancake made of a cereal known as teff, which is served for breakfast, lunch or dinner without cutlery. One simply tears a piece off and uses it to pick up vegetables or meat. Beer was available afterwards, with a choice of product from five national breweries, including one brewing on the basis of a Czech licence.

Day 3 dawned, meaning we had to jump into some four-by-fours and set off for the southern border with Kenya. We'd read about famine in Ethiopia and Somalia, and were concerned about what we'd find, especially because we were powerless to help. Surprisingly, fields with crops and herds of cattle were more often seen than expected. It's true that the people lived in simple huts, usually without water and electricity, but hunger didn't appear to be an issue in that part of the country. However, the ample food produced didn't get distributed sufficiently well and the poor infrastructure was an obstacle. The areas largely affected by acute shortage of food comprised lowlands on the border with Somalia. In contrast, Ethiopia benefited from wealth, a breadth of natural resources and potential for tourism, so its locals might experience a bright future.

Our destinations – the former province of Sidamo and the adjacent district of Yirgacheffe – grow some of the best coffee in the world – and solely arabica, to boot. We stopped by two plantations, admiring their neat coffee trees and watched the ongoing harvest. The practise of drying the coffee cherries on African beds was evident, as was extensive use of the wet method to flush out and remove pulp. Obviously, we got to sample the brews, sense the uniqueness of the coffee in person and meet people involved in the trade. Their excitement and optimism was infectious. Even though workers earned as little as 1.3 USD a day, they wore smiles and colourful, clean clothes. At first glance it was a mystery as to how everything functioned, but the answer probably lay in the elaborate

system of the natural economy, the extent of mutual assistance, a collective mindset and distinct modesty.

The way there and back meant we traversed a rainforest, yet the roads weren't too bad. Nevertheless, the four vehicles experienced four punctures in the few days we travelled. What came as a surprise was to see, in palpable darkness, how many people emerged from the rainforest to enquire if they could help with the wheels. They seemed equally taken aback to see the strange occupants (us) the vehicles contained.

Locals employed at plantations rely on the coffee trade for their livelihoods.



Outside of the rainforest, the population appeared to be quite dense. At any hour of the day, crowds of people streamed along the roads carrying various things or kept watch over grazing cattle. Two signs described aid provided from beyond the nation, even the Czech Republic, both referring to the construction of schools. The People in Need organisation had a particularly high presence in the area.

The one-week trip was at an end, so we returned to Addis Ababa for our flight out, leaving central Africa and its flourishing coffee trade behind. It sure made for some great memories.

China – a voyage of surprise and delight (May 2015)

While the focus of my previous trip to China had solely been on Pu Erh, the scope of the one in May 2015 was far more wideranging. Over the course of eight days, the itinerary was going to cover three provinces – Hubei, Fujian and Zhejiang, and take in the production of Oolong, green, white and blooming teas, plus the promise of Chinese Matcha, which I planned to secure for OXALIS! It was scheduled in May because that was when various tea-related processes coincided.

Our small party – two franchisees and I – met at Frankfurt Airport. The journey ahead remained largely a mystery to us since Lee Peng, OXALIS' Chinese business partner and a friend of mine organising it, hadn't divulged much beyond approximate locations and the rough timetable. Little did we suspect we'd be catching eight planes, mostly flying in-land, and taking three long, high-speed train rides to see a whole load more than anticipated.

Everything was A-OK as far as Shanghai, where we encountered a delay with our connecting flight to the huge city of Wuhan. We landed longing for a pleasant meal in one of the famed fish restaurants, but this was not to be.

Imagine our astonishment when Lee greeted us at the airport with air tickets to Enshi for a plane departing in 15 minutes. We rushed all the way to discover it waiting just for us. The door closed immediately after we'd boarded and the aircraft began to taxi to the runway, having learned we'd be doing "only" another 700 kilometres.

On arrival, members of a local farming community welcomed us all, brandishing a huge banner, probably because most passengers were linked with trade in tea in China or abroad and had come for the official close of the first part of the tea harvest.

We attended an associated tea festival the next morning. Small party balloons hung in the streets, the free gifts they contained could be taken by just popping them. Shops and stands selling tea were everywhere, allowing visitors to sample brews from leaves costing up to 2,000 CNY (284 USD) per kilo. The finest and most expensive examples in the country aren't exported but purchased by wealthy Chinese individuals, who view tea as a status symbol, much like the car they drive. A meeting of representatives of the tea industry was held in the afternoon. The speeches (in Chinese only) went over our heads, so we did some people watching and let the proceedings play out. Finally, we set off to view some spectacular tea plantations in a rolling landscape reminiscent of Darjeeling in India. A real pleasure to behold!

Curiously, a giant teapot the size of a two-storey house stood in one of the tea gardens, most likely a lure for tourists rather than anything else. Anyway, we busied ourselves with looking around the plantations of carefully cut tea shrubs set out in neat rows replete with insect traps; there was even lighting to enable pickers to work in the dark.

A garden in Enshi functions by economically leasing out land to farmers, who tend it for their livelihoods, supplying their crops to a central processing factory. Harvesting occurs in three seasons a year, with four lots being picked per period, so each tea shrub surrenders its leaves twelve times every twelve months. It takes approximately 1.5 hours for a picker to fill a basket. The plantations



are carefully maintained and mostly certified as organic, and constitute the source of the En Shi Yu Lu (“Rare Dew”) and Wu Lu teas for OXALIS.

Enshi lies due east of Wuhan, has 600,000 inhabitants and is at the centre of a landscape ripe for tourism, hence the abundance of hotels continually popping up all over the place. We’d spent our short stay near Enshi, in an area of almost virgin countryside, but it was necessary to move on to the industrial metropolis of Wuhan, where our host’s company was based. The capital of Hubei Province and the most populous city in central China, it sits at the confluence of the massive watercourses of the Yangtze and Han Jiang rivers and boasts a subway system (the fifth city to have one in China). It acts as a transport hub for nine provinces and functions as the financial and political centre for the mid-part of the country.

Although I’d visited the company’s main office in the suburbs just three years earlier, it had changed almost beyond recognition, much like everything else in China. Developments included new office spaces, a warehouse run with great precision and a tasting room furnished in a timeless manner. It was there we sampled around two dozen teas, some of which I purchased for the upcoming season. Highlights were Golden Monkey AAA (a renowned black tea), Jade Needle of a vibrant green shade and a splendid White Bud Yin Zhen white tea. Subsequent conversations with Lee also brought to light the Ethical Tea Partnership – an international organization seeking fair distribution of income in the sales chain from the grower to the final reseller. The piqued our interest to adopt similar principles as fully as possible in the way we do business

Our breathless trip continued apace, having arrived just that morning, the evening saw us catch a plane to the coastal province of Fujian. We landed in the wealthy resort of Xiamen, the venue for major tea exhibitions. The travel didn’t stop there, though, as we jumped straight into a car headed north to Xianyou County

and the urban sprawl of Putian, near undulating mountains where Oolong tea is produced.

It’s no coincidence that the best Chinese Oolong comes from here, such as Ti Kuan Yin. After all, Taiwan – famous for Oolong – lies only 300 kilometres to the east. They both benefit from great terroir as a result of inhabiting a similar longitudinal position, and they share experience and technology with each other. Little wonder, then, the semi-oxidised tea thrives on both sides of the sea.

Tea bushes circling hillsides on a plantation.



Anyway, the trip all the way up the mountains seemed never-ending. The road zigzagged between paddy fields to the neat, green tea plantations above. At first glance, the leaves on the small shrubs looked flatter and stiffer than usual, and for good reason. They are specially cultivated to produce superior Oolong for the spring harvest, when the leaves are picked exclusively by hand. Machinery is used instead in the summer, since the yield is lesser in quality, with the effect of also rounding off the shape the shrubs.

We were shown around the processing plant, taking in the procedures applied for Oolong. And it was something else, believe me! The various operations meshed together seamlessly, and the workers had clearly formed themselves into a highly efficient team.

The process begins with the leaves entering the facility, where they are left to wilt on bare ground. A machine resembling a stirrer steams them with hot air for about six minutes, which is followed by the rolling stage whereby inherent moisture is released. Then a cycle of processes happens, repeated up to ten times: drying occurs with hairdryers, and they undergo phases of compression and release. The aim of these actions is to form the leaves into a squarish shape. Eventually, there's a final stage of drying by hot air on parallel plates, with the end product being packed in bulky sacks. This takes just five hours under the supervision of a team leader, who's responsible for judging the current state of the leaves and deciding the necessary length and repetition of each procedure. The moment that oxidation by hot air is stopped represents a crucial step in this, as it directly affects the taste profile of the tea.

However, the Oolong has to pass through one more operation (usually at a separate processing unit not on site) before being ready for sale. We went to one and witnessed the final sorting process for removing larger pieces that contained any residual parts of the stem. It also permits separation of product according



Tea leaves in baskets awaiting further processing.

to colour, thereby obtaining lush green tea (more distant from the top of the shrub) and pale green tea (the freshest, youngest leaves). Then it's finally packaged for retail purposes. Beyond well-known Oolongs, such as Ti Kuan Yin and Dong Ding, we saw other types in the factory, e.g. Bai Hao Yin, Mingpin and Buddha Hand.

We caught an express train in the late afternoon to Fuding, home to half a million people, and a city set against the backdrop of the attractive Taimu Mountains popular with tourists. The spectacular plantations lined the surrounding hillsides, giving them the impression of rounded-off heaps of sugar. Crucially, we'd finally arrived in the heartland of white tea, so vital to the remainder of our trip.



A tour was given of the impressive factory of Track Xiang, where tea largely intended for wealthy Chinese consumers is made. In fact, the process for producing white tea is simple. The very youngest leaves are picked when they're still closed buds, followed by stages of wilting, sorting, drying and packing.

The next day we were shown around a facility specialising in ornate Artisan (or Blooming) tea. A special type of long-leaf white tea is the basis, slightly moistened to increase its elasticity, the leaves being intricately positioned around a centrally placed flower. Once an article is complete and shaped as desired, it's put into a nylon cover and left to dry. The 20-30 women working there were able to produce 5-6 kilograms per day, creating pieces in several different shapes solely by hand.

Our fascinating trip of discovery was quickly coming to a close. Just one growing region lay ahead by express train - the surroundings of Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province, some seven hundred kilometres away. The journey was comfortable and only took four hours. The high-speed rail network in the eastern and central portions of the country was constructed to primarily serve as a means of public transport. Remarkably affordable for a broad strata of the population, it's furthered options for travel and acted as a boost to the country's finances.

A shining example of China's economic miracle - the industrial city of Ningbo lies not far away. Even though such industrial modernity has affected Shaoxing, vast tea plantations abound in its immediate surroundings. Entering them felt as if passing through Alice's famous Looking Glass. The organic tea shrubs we found there were carefully cut, perfectly shaped and shaded by cloth, the habit in the run-up to harvest time.

The influx of Japanese capital to the area was evident in its production and processing methods adopted locally, resulting in the production of typical forms of Japanese tea. The bushes looked identical to those growing in Shizuoka, Japan. The on-site processing facility boasts technological advancements providing for high standards in treatment and hygiene. It's the source of

the Sencha green tea used in OXALIS' flavoured varieties, while other products include Hōjicha, Kukicha, Bancha and Genmaicha. A real highlight, though, is the high-quality Matcha made there. Hats off to the growers and processors for what they've achieved.

And with that our eventful and memorable expedition came to an end. That very Saturday afternoon we boarded a train to Shanghai, the ubiquitous concrete of its buildings at total variance to the almost unblemished countryside we'd explored. Europe beckoned, but the warm welcomes, optimism, wonderful tastes and aromas stayed with us.

Korea – an emerging powerhouse of tea (November 2015)

Upon the invitation of the Boseong World Tea Championship Committee, I had the chance to visit Korea and attend an event celebrating the country's tea and related accessories, together with experts from across the globe. The trip started out in the city of Boseong at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, continuing to the subtropical island of Jeju. The plantations were stunning, and the quality of production extremely high.

Korea's culture of tea dates from the reign of the Tang Dynasty (7th century), when planting began on the mountain of Jirisan (one of the three highest in the nation). During the period of the Goryeo Kingdom (10th to 13th centuries), tea became an integral part of the lifestyle of those high up in society, often served at ceremonies and the subject matter of poems. However, when Confucianism replaced Buddhism in the 14th century, contemporary tea culture was largely obliterated. Numerous Buddhist temples were sacked, where monks had drunk it for centuries, so it seemed that it the habit could never return.

In the early 19th century, a scholar named Jeong Yakyeong (also referred to as Dasan, literally meaning "tea mountain") received tuition from monks on tea. He wrote articles on cultivating tea



bushes, the process of production, how to prepare it and its health benefits. In 1806, a young Buddhist monk, Cho-ui Seonsa, spent a few months with Dasan, obviously consuming tea frequently. Cho-ui is considered the one who restored Korea's tea culture, later founding a hermitage (called Ilchi-am) on the mountain above a temple (Daedun-sa) near the town of Haenam. He lived out the rest of his life there, instructing others in tea. In fact, Cho-ui is to Korea what Sen no Rikyū was to Japan; the latter was a Japanese tea master who defined and promoted the wabi-cha form of tea ceremony, known for its simplicity and naturalness.

Despite the efforts of such tea missionaries, it wasn't until 1945 that things really picked up. Korea had gained independence from Japan after 35 years, permitting tea master Chae Won-Hwa to found the Panyaro Institute in Seoul. She inspires her students of all ages from across the country with her teachings on the subject.

The nation's tea industry got hit hard in 2007, once it came to light that chemicals had been applied in the processing stages. The crisis resembled that of wine in Austria in 1980, involving the use of anti-freezing mixtures. Anyhow, the upshot in both cases was great emphasis on assuring quality and proper inspection.

That's all in the past, though, as today Korea wins numerous world-class competitions for its tea. Indeed, the heightened demand for natural farming methods means that up to 50% of the nation's tea is certified as organic, particularly on the volcanic island of Jeju.

Most cultivation occurs in the south of the country: Boseong in South Jeolla Province, Hadong in South Gyeongsang Province, Jeju – an island on the southern coast of the country, and the slopes of the mountain of Jirisan (the peak is at 2,915 metres above sea level). Green tea is the typical end product. Out of these, Boseong has the greatest amount of land dedicated to the crop. Known as the birthplace of the Korean tea industry, it accounts for 40% of domestic tea production. It lies north of the growing areas in China, hence the climate is cooler and late frosts complicate

the picking of leaves in the spring. However, in turn, the teas boast an intense aroma and taste, making it well worth the effort.

The aforementioned Jeju also goes by the moniker the Island of Gods, and maybe thanks to them (or the locale) it's the source of the finest green teas. Although 70% of the nation's product comes from inland plantations, it's Jeju's tea that appears on the shelves of shops abroad. It benefits from a unique terroir ideal for growing the crop – fertile volcanic soil, rich in minerals, and a high content of grit for excellent irrigation. To top this off, the climate is predominantly wet, and the plantations even receive natural shading due to mist.

After a four-hour ride in a mini-bus, the party I was travelling with arrived in Boseong, the epicentre of Korea's tea industry. We were to attend the World Tea Forum, a recent annual event that

The thoroughness of locals is reflected in how well they maintain their tea plantations.



lasted four days, which also covered ceramics and porcelain. A nation renowned for innovation in technology, its culture of tea (especially of the green variety) has advanced rapidly, too, evidenced through the highly regarded types from Gwangju (outside Boseong) and Jeju.

A group of about 15 experts, myself included, had been tasked with the wonderful job of sampling and evaluating tea from farmers. Tasting dozens of types every day meant we became familiar with the qualities of the local terroir. We got to try a wide range of black, green and Oolong teas. In my opinion, Korea's products are comparable to the much better known ones of Japan, so – dear reader – do seek them out.

Tea ceremonies were held every day at the exhibition, put on by educational establishments, often using Sejak or Matcha as the basis. Each had its own customs, i.e. styles of movement, variance in materials and simple clothing, but shared the same core utensils: a cloth for the ceramic items and another for catching drips, a pot, a jug, a vessel for hot water and four drinking bowls. The subtly different ceremonies proved very popular with visitors to the event and a real treat for the eyes.

It wasn't all work and no play for us tea experts, as we also enjoyed a few excursions laid on for us. One took in plantations prepared for downtime in the winter, having been harvested long ago, as well as the important Buddhist temple of Daedunsa (alternatively Daeheung-sa). We ate a vegetarian lunch comprised of local organic produce with a resident Buddhist monk, accompanied by a superior green tea (obviously) from the neighbouring plantation, which produces the finest products with astronomical price tags to match. We sat on the floor to eat the meal at a low table in the customary manner for the nation and even its restaurants.

Once the exhibition had come to a close, I travelled on to Jeju. The island lies between Korea and Japan and is easily accessible from both. A popular destination for Koreans, it's also where

subtropical fruits and the best tea is grown. Much has been done in recent decades to transform the stony land above its shores into neat tea plantations. One was of particular interest to me – the organic garden of Osulloc. A state-of-the-art processing facility stands next door, equipped with advanced Japanese machinery, which produces Matcha of a quality rivalling that of Japan. Another highlight was looking around the Jeju Osulloc Tea Museum amidst the picturesque plantations, with displays of ceramic ware and more besides. Visitors can sample and purchase the tea grown nearby from its shop, while it's possible to enjoy meals on-site containing the aforementioned Matcha, including incredible ice-cream. The largest tea museum in Korea, it attracts over a million people each year.

The Buddhist temple of Daedun-sa – one of numerous examples of the attentive approach to life demonstrated by Koreans.



With that, I flew to Seoul and on to Prague. It might only have been a short visit but it proved enlightening, tempting me back for further exploration – sooner rather than later, I hope.

Matcha on the island of Honshu (May 2016)

A party comprising some franchisees and myself, set off for Osaka Airport from Prague and Helsinki, and it was obvious on arrival that things were very different. We actually landed at sea, since the airport (built in 1994) was situated on an artificial island connected to the mainland by bridge (for both trains and cars). Talk about space saving! Such an exercise is absolutely necessary, though, because Japan straddles several tectonic islands, with a surface area only 4.7 times greater than my homeland of the Czech Republic but almost thirteen-fold more inhabitants (nearly 127 million in 2019).

We hired a car and drove the few dozen kilometres to Kyoto. The view was one of an unbroken cityscape – a montage of industrial tower blocks and small homes. No fields, no forests, no greenery. This was just one of the numerous faces of this otherwise wonderful country. Indeed, the following five days in Kyoto revealed sights that rank amongst the best I've witnessed in my life. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe form a triangle in the heart of Kansai Region. Earthquakes feature heavily in the country's history. In 1997, Kobe was hit by a major one, causing considerable damage to part of the city, but repairs followed swiftly. The same year saw multiple quakes in the south of Japan, though Kansai Region was unaffected. Kyoto dates back over 1,200 years and boasts some of the finest temples and cultural treasures in the country. Its name has changed a lot over the centuries. Originally, it was Heian-kyō, then Miyako (the metropolis) and Saikyō (the western seat), and has been known as Kyoto since 1868.

Kyoto is situated in the western part of the island of Honshu, surrounded by mountains, making summer nights rather muggy with no breeze. The city survived World War II intact, unlike others, so it's one of the best preserved in Japan. Notably, it acted as a venue for a conference to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in 1997, lending its name to the subsequent treaty – the Kyoto Protocol.

There's loads to see: more than 1,800 temples, hundreds of holy shrines, historical buildings and structures, famous gardens and spectacular sites in wooded hills. In fact, it'd take months to explore everything fully, and taking a tour might mean missing out on some of the better examples. Modernity is evident as well, obviously. Since it's the country's seventh largest city (1.5 million residents), contemporary structures abound, mostly in the south. The railway station from 1997 makes for an impressive piece of

A Geisha at an event in Japan.



architecture, leading to a modern city much like any other. However, one doesn't need to go far to find a beauty spot.

For instance, not far from the station lies the temple of Honganji and Nijō Castle. Crossing the River Kamo towards the east reveals more of traditional Kyoto. Ten temples, mostly Buddhist, surrounded by Zen gardens stand to the east of the old quarter famous for Geisha – Gion. Each has its own specific magic, starting with the temple of Kiyomizu, affording a magnificent view of the entire city. Stretching out to the north is the street of Sannenzaka, a popular attraction full of hustle and bustle, where we saw two Geisha before encountering a traditional wedding ceremony. Further to the north, the Path of Philosophy wends its way along a picturesque stream past several palaces until it reaches Ginkaku-ji – the stunning Silver Pavilion.

The north-west of the town is home to breathtaking places such as Kinkaku-ji (the Golden Pavilion) and Ryōan-ji, with its famous stone garden. Most Zen Buddhist palaces have a small tea room, where one can taste Matcha and rest a little. I could go on and on...

Matcha is ubiquitous throughout Japan. More than a powdered green tea to be mixed with water, it's a standard ingredient in food. For example, Matcha ice-cream is commonplace, just like vanilla is elsewhere.

Supermarkets and specialist tea shops sell Matcha biscuits, sweets, jellies and cakes. It's put in wine or beer, and appears to be consumed more in these ways than as tea.

Kyoto is home to a Japanese chain of coffee bars going by the name of Coffee Arabica that hopes to expand globally. A local franchise sold Yebitsu, a great beer sure to delight fans of the beverage. Otherwise, the city's varied cuisine is famous, its sushi restaurants serving numerous species of raw fish with high-quality rice.

The city loves holding folk festivals. By chance, on 15th May, we witnessed one entitled Aoi Matsuri, which consisted of a long procession of allegorical figures from ancient and more recent history, i.e. Samurai in different garb, pretty Maiko (apprentice Geisha) and Geisha. Even children were suitably dressed for the occasion. So we got to see a great swathe of iconic Japanese figures in one go.

Leaving Kyoto behind, we caught the Shinkansen bullet train to Aichi Prefecture, terminating in Nishio in the north-east. We got off at Mikawa-Anjō Station, which was the gateway to the cities of Anjō and Toyota (the base of the car manufacturer). A relatively small and quiet place, Anjō is set amidst beautiful countryside close to the Pacific Ocean and home to some 183,000 inhabitants. Crucial for our trip were its facilities for producing Matcha, the largest to exist in Japan.

The entire process involved in making Matcha is one of the most expensive in the world. It begins by selecting seeds and producing seedlings. It takes five years for a seedling to grow sufficiently, after which time the leaves on the bush are picked for the following two years, but only for testing purposes.

Ultimately, the leaves on the bushes are picked just once a year. Some days (7 to 28) prior to the harvest up to 90% of the light is cut out by shading the plants from above. This encourages a drastic rise in the green pigment (chlorophyll) and L-theanine, the amino acid responsible for the tea's delicious taste. The shading also forces the plants to grow towards what light is left, creating longer, thinner leaves and softer buds. Only the most fragile leaves are picked and, of course, by hand. They undergo relatively simple steaming, rolling and drying procedures, carried out at one of several facilities in the surroundings. This results in an intermediate product called Aracha (alternatively referred to as Unrefined/Crude tea).

The Aracha is purchased from farmers by a specialist producer, treating it in the following sophisticated manner to create a form





The Golden Pavilion in north-west Kyoto is one of the city's most important heritage sites.

of tea called Tencha. The Aracha is cut and sieved, and a stream of air is applied to remove any residual twigs, stems, stalks and other impurities. A drying stage at a temperature of 95°C is carried out for eight minutes. Further separation of older leaves and tea dust occurs by applying an electrical charge. Stirring the resultant product gives rise to the aforementioned Tencha, representing an intermediate stage. Finally, the green Tencha is ground between special granite millstones into the very fine powder of Matcha. In the past, Tencha would be crushed by millstones just before serving it, to ensure it was as fresh as possible and didn't diminish in taste and aroma. The usual practice today is to do this directly in the processing plant. Strict hygiene conditions are necessary to obtain Tencha and, ultimately, Matcha, with multiple mechanisms in place for inspection.

We witnessed all of the above before entering the company's showroom. Attempts were made to grind Tencha into a powder ourselves, and we sampled Matcha in different ways, from the ceremonial style to a serving of it over crushed ice.

Boarding the bullet train once again, we travelled to Japan's third largest city of Osaka. With over 2.7 million inhabitants, its hectic city centre offered up another face of the country, one filled with gaming arcades which seemed far removed from the beauty spots of Kyoto and tea plantations in Aichi Province. Looking back on it, the strongest memories I have are those of the lofty temples, the friendly and modest people, and the Matcha, with its pea-like aroma and refreshing taste.

A botanical garden acts as a balm for the soul, as does a good cup of tea.



Editorial

We hope you have enjoyed reading Petr Zelik's musings on OXALIS, his journeys and experiences.

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Alternatively, a more corporate feed is on LinkedIn.

Finally, our website is in English and features new content regularly – www.oxalis.cz/en.



THE OXALIS STORY

The inside story and travels across the globe

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Photographs by Vlastimil Kolarik, Petr Zelik, Marek Herman, Rene Zapletal

Original Czech text edited by Tereza Filinová

Technical editing by Pavel Kolín

English language version prepared by Lubomir Moudry and Julian Overall

Composition by Pavel Kadlec

Published by Mladá fronta a.s., as its 10,734th publication, Prague 2019

ISBN 978-80-204-5647-2

Purchase Mladá fronta's books at:

Mladá fronta, a.s. – divize Knihy

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The Cloverleaf of Zlín

“The inspiration for the company’s name occurred at a tea party one Saturday, and was settled on by my wife and I. We considered several Latin names of plants that sounded nice. In fact, one was Protea – a South African genus of flower. However, we didn’t opt for it because its pronunciation leans towards English, but people speaking other languages – such as Czech – would express it differently. Anyway, Oxalis was the eventual winner, which means cloverleaf (or a type of sorrel), so the thought it might just bring good fortune was also in our minds.”

“Even before founding the company, I dreamed of opening a stylish tea room somewhere quiet in the city of Zlín. My search got underway in early 1994, bringing to light a small house with a garden in the street of Sadová. It appeared to be an oasis of peace just a few hundred metres from the city centre – an ideal location. Its refurbishment followed a few months later. The ground floor contained mangers, from what had been a stable for horses, while we even unearthed a WWII parachute on the first floor! First came the tea room on the upper floor, the shop being added below in 1995. This is the story behind the stylish Čajový dům (Tea House), which far outstripped what its competitors had to offer.”

“OXALIS exports to 28 countries, a number which is constantly on the rise. Of these, Poland holds the greatest market share. Other major destinations include Slovakia, Great Britain, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Ukraine, followed by Italy, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Finland and Sweden. We also have a presence in Serbia and the Baltic States, and further afield in India, Singapore and Malaysia. Obviously, we don’t send tea back to Asia that we bought from there. Instead, the tea dispatched either comes from other territories or comprises flavoured, fruit or herbal blends, to which OXALIS has added value.”