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TEA INFUSION CHALLENGE DECLARES CHAMPION AT WORLD TEA EXPO

Alaska's Steven Downer, Sipping Streams Tea Company, Beat Out Top Tea Sommeliers in a Heated Competition on June 26

LAS VEGAS, Nev. (July 5, 2011) --- Steven Downer, Sipping Streams Tea Company in Fairbanks, Ala., showcased his tea expertise and steeping abilities, taking the top spot at the 2011 Tea Infusion Challenge. The event was held June 26 during the three-day World Tea Expo in Las Vegas, Nev., June 24 - 26 at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

The Tea Infusion Challenge is an annual, competitive event that determines the best Infusionist --- a tea professional (non-manufacturer) that has comprehensive product knowledge, a high level of brewing skills and the innate talent to best express a tea's characteristics and its intended cup.

QTrade Teas & Herbs' Manik Jayakumar, one of the judges and a tea purveyor, said, "Steven was really outstanding during the Tea Infusion Challenge. He brewed the tea really well and had a lot of product knowledge. It was clear that he had a lot of practice in the craft of brewing tea, and he served beautiful, perfect cups. He brewed at the correct temperatures and at the right quantity for each of the four teas he prepared in the competition -- and some competitors did not do that right. Steven was also asked a lot of tea questions and he really knew his stuff, answering everything correctly."

Tea Infusion Challenge judge Fumi Sugita, Aiya America, noted that Downer, a student of tea for more than five years, prepared a brilliant matcha. "It was the perfect balance of water and tea," he said. "Another competitor, for example, had a stronger, bitter matcha. However, Steven's teas had great flavors and excellent aromas. I gave him the maximum points -- 10 out of 10."

After the competition, Downer explained, "Whether you have a \$100 per ounce tea or a \$10 per ounce tea, the price shouldn't be the bottleneck to quality and taste of the tea. The point is to do the best you can to get the taste out. We're in an instant culture, and we want everything in a hurry. However, we need to pay attention to the art of tea and still keep in mind that we live in a fast-paced society. The Tea Infusion Challenge reminds us of this and melds these two ideas."

Kasia Vermaire, the first Dutch Tea sommelier and winner of the 2010 Dutch Tea Sommelier Competition, came in second place. Amy Lawrence of Afternoon to Remember Fine Tea and Gifts as well as ATR Publishing, who once owned a tea room that was named Best Small Tea Room in the U.S. in 2006, was third. And Jonathan Munsayac of Tranquil Tea Lounge, who has more than 10 years of experience in restaurant management, came in fourth place.

The competitors each prepared four cups of tea within 15 minutes, including: a Darjeeling tea, provided by G.S. Haly; a matcha tea, provided by Aiya America; an oolong tea, provided by ABC Tea; and a puer tea, provided by QTrade Teas & Herbs. Competitors were lead in a discussion between audience members about the teas they were steeping and their chosen methodologies during their preparations.



The highly competitive, interactive Tea Infusion Challenge demonstrated how the same tea can taste drastically different depending on the method used to steep the tea. Tea Infusion Challenge judges rated each contender on: quality of infusion, such as color, taste, smell and leaf agony; technical skills, such as timing, volume and overall presentation; and tea knowledge.

After judging, Jayakumar noted that while presentation is a key element, the overall idea of the competition is to “serve a very pleasant tasting tea.” In fact, he compares tea sommeliers to chefs. “Some chefs are flashy and some are just focused on their craft. It can be the same with tea sommeliers, but there was no flashy stuff with our champion, Steven.”

According to Vermaire, the second place winner, “Tea is all about knowledge, dedication and, most of all, sharing. With the 2011 Tea Infusion Challenge, competitors inspire and share with the audience, while telling the beautiful and complex story of tea.”

Third place winner Lawrence commented, “Tea is my life and my passion. The more you learn about tea, the more there is to learn. Competitions, such as these, show people the many different facets of tea. The right water, the vessel you use to steep the tea, the temperature and time all play a unique role in the outcome of the infused leaf into the cup. And everyone has different tastes – neither right nor wrong; tea adapts to you, and you make it your own by how you prepare it.”

Fourth place contestant Munsayac added, “The Tea Infusion Challenge is definitely beneficial for the tea industry, the competitors and the audience or tea lovers paying attention. By competing, I was able to more fully understand that there are so many variations to steep the different teas. Overall, I was happy to be a part of the competition and hope to compete next year – as I want to win.”

The 2011 Tea Infusion Challenge was sponsored by ABC Tea, Aiya, the G.S. Haly Company and QTrade Teas & Herbs. Other judges included: Thomas Shu, ABC Tea, and Mo Sardella, The G.S. Haly Company. Next year’s Tea Infusion takes place on June 3, 2012, during World Tea Expo.

About World Tea Expo

World Tea Expo, which is the largest and most prominent event for the tea industry, caters to tea retailers, restaurateurs, food service leaders, hoteliers, spa owners and other business professionals who want to learn more about the latest products, business opportunities and tea trends. The event takes place at the Las Vegas Convention Center, June 24 – 26, and conference registration and details are available at www.WorldTeaExpo.com.

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