

Tea from the heart



Photo: Ajiri Tea Company. Boxes of Ajiri Teabags are decorated with white labels. The paper for these labels is handmade using a combination of water hyacinth (an invasive plant in Lake Victoria) and recycled office paper. Each box contains 16 teabags.

A whole lot of “takk” for just a little tea at Ajiri Tea Company

Staff Reporter
Norwegian American Weekly

Like any good Norwegian-Americans, Sara and Kate Holby (age 26 and 23, respectively) developed a taste for jam on waffles, brunost on toast, and lutefisk left best on the plate. But they also developed a distinctly Norwegian appetite for global responsibility. In 2009, both in Kenya, they saw first-hand the consequences of the financial crisis on global aid. As if overnight, funds to Kenyan NGOs dried up, leaving many who had relied on food, drugs, and jobs stranded. Looking to Norwegian ideals and practices of social responsibility, but also to their Norwegian grandmother who had a strong sense of purpose and get-to-it-iveness, they decided to create their own project that would make a lasting and measurable difference in Kenya.

The result was the creation of Ajiri Tea Company. Ajiri means ‘to employ’ in Swahili. Ajiri Tea Company employs 63 women in the Kisii district of western Kenya to hand make labels out of banana bark for tea boxes. They buy the tea from a cooperative factory in Kisii that is managed by a woman and owned by 10,000 small-scale farmers; 100% of the profits then go back to the same region in Kenya to pay school fees and purchase books, uniforms, and other school supplies for orphans. After just three years Ajiri Tea is sold in over 450 stores and its non-profit, Ajiri Foundation, is currently sending 25 orphans to school. “It’s been especially exciting seeing what the women have done with the money that they have earned. Some of the women have bought seeds, others have rented land, and Yunes, Rael, and Sarah even

bought cows! They use some of the milk to help feed their families, and sell some of the milk for income,” says Kate Holby.

They say in Kenya that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, both in the U.S. and in Kenya, it has taken many communities to help build Ajiri Tea. The women making the labels, the shop owners and customers all feel part of the bigger “Ajiri” project. Creating and being part of a larger community that spans borders came naturally to Sara and Kate. They had grown up aware of their place in a bigger Norwegian-American community and a sense of the global responsibility that comes with this community.

With the creation of Ajiri Tea, Sara and Kate try to emulate that close sense of community on a global scale, where their customers share a sense of place, purpose, and vision for difference in the world. “We have won a few big awards, including two Sofi Awards for Innovation in Packaging Design, and two Buyer’s Choice Awards for Best Black Tea. These awards mean a lot because they represent the work of the people in Kenya—the tea growers and the women who make the labels. Winning these awards just shows how many different people’s work and creativity has gone into making Ajiri so successful,” notes Sara Holby. A cup of Ajiri Tea does not soothe or remove their customers from the world’s problems, but rather has made them feel that they can be part of a global solution. In the coming weeks they are set to launch Ajiri Coffee and a line of flavored Ajiri Teas. These are exciting times for the Ajiri project, and we hope you will share the

excitement with them!

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