

## Word of mouth The tea hunter

The founder of Lahloo Pantry in Bristol travelled far and wide to find the finest teas, she tells Jessica Salter. Photographs by Rebecca Bernstein

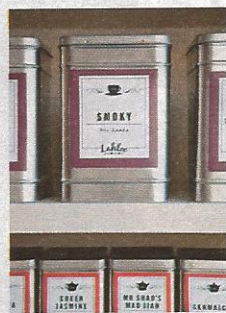
Josh Forwood, a tea 'infusionist', is making me a cup of green tea. He scoops up a teaspoon of bright green powder, made from stone-ground bittersweet young green Matcha leaves (from Japan's Uji region), sieves it and whisks it in a bowl of 80C water for two minutes ('the froth lifts the flavour') and presents the bowl with a slight bow.

Reverence to oriental tea ceremonies, as well as to the tea itself, is central to the ethos at Lahloo, a tea shop and wholesaler in Bristol set up in 2009 by Kate Gover, which specialises in single-estate, hand-picked loose-leaf teas from some of the world's smallest tea gardens. Gover, 36, personally selected the 32 teas from locations both far (the Zhejiang mountains in China and the foothills of Mount Kenya) and near (the peppermint tea is from Hampshire). Gover knows all her 22 producers by name. 'Mr Masamutu makes this tea from his grandfather's 90-year-old Yabukita trees,' she says, sipping a light, fruity Japanese black tea. Others include 112-year-old Arthur Njuguna Komo in the Great Rift Valley, Kenya, and Bachan Gyawali, who runs the Jun Chiyabari tea garden in eastern Nepal and promotes Nepalese tea, which has long been obscured by Darjeeling. 'It's key for me to tell the story behind the tea,' Gover says. She has the zeal of the newly converted. Eleven years ago she didn't like tea ('coming from Yorkshire that was seen as strange'), but in 2002, enticed by the windows of a Japanese tea shop in Paris, where she was on holiday, she tried 'the most amazing green tea,' she says. 'That one tea took me on a very personal journey. I found that I do like tea, it just has to be well sourced and taste incredible.'

As she researched tea (using holidays to travel) she realised she wanted to open a tea shop. Then her mother told her about her great-great-grandfather, George Hockaday, who had sailed on a 19th-century tea clipper called the Lahloo. The clippers raced back from China to London to bring the freshest tea to the market; the cargo of the first



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ship could earn a premium of sixpence a pound, and the crew were rewarded.

Gover used the name Lahloo 'to continue the tea story'. She left her job as the customer services manager of Bristol Wholefoods in 2009 and used savings to set up the business, initially as an online retailer. Using contacts from a previous job managing a Carluccio's restaurant in London, she persuaded people who served 'amazing wine, but rubbish tea' to stock Lahloo. Michelin-starred clients include the Walnut Tree Inn in Wales, Casamia near Bristol and Cowley Manor in the Cotswolds.

Two years later, in October 2011, she and her husband, Neil, an accountant, sold their flat to buy what is now

Lahloo Pantry. A team of 14 are trained in tea, much as a sommelier is in wine. Regardless of what they order from the menu, customers get a complimentary shot-sized tea of the month (when I visited it was White Whisper, a 'palate cleansing and detoxing' cold-infused Japanese white tea). 'People might come in to have a Bristol Brew [her Assam from the Khongea garden in northeast India], but next time they will try something else,' Gover says.

Gover's own daily tea routine starts with a cup of matcha ('energy-giving, without the crash you get after drinking coffee'), oolongs through the morning, and white teas in the evening. She struggles to name her favourite tea but eventually settles on Mr Shao's maojian green tea, picked in the Jiangxi province of China. 'It's what green tea should be about – juicy, slightly sweet and makes you feel really good.'

Her customers are as enthused as she is – sales increased by 280 per cent in the past year – and four of her teas have won Great Taste Awards. By March she will have sold 2,000kg of tea in a year – mostly wholesale (60 per cent of the business), although the retail side is growing. A 50g tin of Matsamutu black costs £10 (£3.25 for a pot in the Pantry), Bristol Brew is £4 for 50g (£2 per pot). She also sells tea accessories, such as a bamboo whisk for the matcha tea, and beautiful white porcelain dimpled tea cups made by a London potter.

Gover is considering a second shop, but says she works six days a week, often until midnight: 'This business is the equivalent of having a four-year-old child, it takes so much time and energy.' [lahlootea.co.uk](http://lahlootea.co.uk)

### What's on

**Round trip** Rotunda, the curvaceous canalside restaurant in the new King's Cross development in London, is holding a beef-and-claret dinner on March 5. Four courses and a wine tasting for £48 (020-7014 2840; [rotundabarandrestaurant.co.uk](http://rotundabarandrestaurant.co.uk)).

**Beside manor** A two-night dinner and B&B Taste of Norfolk break at Titchwell Manor near Brancaster lets you sample some of the region's finest produce, including local fish and seafood. £198 per person, until March 21 (01485-210221; [titchwellmanor.com](http://titchwellmanor.com)).

**Wine monthly** Bar Boulud, sister to the popular New York bar, has monthly Friday wine evenings at its London base in the Mandarin Hotel: 2012 wine discoveries, with the head sommelier, David Vareille (March 15); six global wines paired with one dish, includes wine, charcuterie and cheese board (April 19). £50 per person at Bar Boulud, Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, London (020-7201 3899; [danielnyc.com/barbouludlondon.html](http://danielnyc.com/barbouludlondon.html)).