

スーパープレミアム全シリーズ完売、1本30万円 世界基準ボトルドティー誕生秘話

2006年会社設立当時、前代未聞、唯一無二の製法で作るボトルドティー開発のため、たまたま静岡で、ある技術の研修(HACCP)があると聞き足を運びました。通常、飲料水以外の容器入り飲料は、加熱殺菌及び長期保存できるように添加物を加えて製品化しなければなりません。なぜならば、グローバルヘルスの基準から、微生物(細菌・黴・酵母・ウイルス)を0にしなければならないからです。淹れ方が簡便な「水出し茶」普及を検証しましたが、一般家庭及び飲食店において「水出し茶」の普及は「食中毒」「感染症」リスクが非常に高すぎます。なぜならば、茶葉は農産品だから。チャギは露天栽培、茶摘みから製茶、梱包、流通、消費者の口に入るまで、一度も、洗浄しません。無菌の状態で茶葉詰めは不可能です。原料の水は腐敗する、台所・厨房は微生物の巣窟だからです。水抽出するための容器は完ぺきに滅菌できない。一方で、カメリアシネンシス系のチャギの茶葉で作る「お茶」は「カテキン」のネーミングの由来となる抗菌・抗ウイルス・抗酵母・抗酸化等の機能成分が主体のため、常飲する習慣は、食中毒、感染症や生活習慣病の予防対策につながります。我々は、お茶の類い稀な機能成分を活かせば、加熱殺菌はしない・風味を変える添加物は加えない茶飲料製造が実現できる仮説を立て、世界的に類がない製造手法の茶飲料製品化の決意をしました。

保健所には「正気ですか?」と製品化を拒まれました。それでも、手仕事でも微生物を制御した工程・工場を作れば製品化できるのではないかと偶然その技術研修が「静岡」だったことで、静岡を訪れました。保健所が許可するか判らない、資金0、工場建設のため銀行融資が叶うか判らないお茶飲料を製品化に挑む我々に、茶所、静岡ならではの「日本茶の危機」を、私たちに語ってくれました。「茶文化を変え、日本茶の未来を変えるのではないかと」という切実な期待からです。早速、静岡茶発祥の地を訪れました。「手摘み茶」を賞味する機会を頂き衝撃を受けました。埋もれた歴史背景、地理的条件、茶畑の形状、栽培方法、色・味・香・余韻。日本に生まれていながら本物の日本茶を知らないことが「恥ずかしい」と思いました。美味しさと、感動を超える、「これが本物の日本茶」であることに。

何が何でも、保健所から前例のない茶飲料製造販売許可を取得せねばならない、資金調達をして小さくても世界基準の品質管理ができるクリーンルーム工場を建設しなければならぬと決意しました。ロイヤルブルーティーの原料茶の最低基準は「手摘み茶」です。「手摘み」の日本茶はとて高価すぎて、商品化しても数万・数十万円以上になります。それでも、採算度外視で開発し、世の中に知らしめることで、「新しく、本物の茶文化を創る」という思いでボトルドティーを誕生に挑みました。

誕生後、特に茶産地からの注目が高く、日本一の茶農家であるカネタ太田園・天竜茶研究会 代表 太田昌孝さんに出会いました。2008年、農商工連携第一号認定を取得、商品化に挑みました。太田昌孝さんは、無名であった茶産地、天竜茶を世界一にした地域統括、高い技術から育まれる高級日本茶を市場・文化を創世した功績から天皇杯・黄綬褒章授章を賜り、現在の上皇上皇后両陛下謁見の機会を賜りました。

文化が経済を作るという我々の事業も、生業が立ち、漸く実業界で注目され、今日に至ります。





¥300,000 per Bottle “Super Premium” Series Sells Out— The True Story of the World Standard in Bottled Tea

Around the time Royal Blue Tea Japan was established in 2006, we happened to hear about an HACCP course offered in Shizuoka, which would enable us to develop bottled tea made with a unique, groundbreaking production method. Normally, bottled beverages other than water must be heat sterilized and contain additives to preserve them for a long periods time. This is because global health standards require that they must not contain any microbes (i.e., bacteria, mold, yeast, and viruses). We tested out offering easy-to-prepare cold-brewed tea, but the risk of contracting food poisoning and disease in consumer households and restaurants was far too high. There are several reasons for this. First, tea leaves are agricultural products, so tea plants are not washed even once throughout the entire production process—from outdoor cultivation and harvesting, to processing, packaging, distribution, and consumption. Therefore, it is impossible to package tea leaves in a sterilized state. In addition, tea’s other main ingredient of water can spoil, and kitchens are dens of bacteria. Finally, containers for cold-brewing cannot be completely sterilized. However, tea is made from the leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant, which contain catechins. The main functional compound in tea, catechins provide antibacterial, antiviral, antifungal, antioxidant, and other benefits, so drinking it regularly can help prevent food poisoning, infectious disease, and lifestyle-related diseases. We theorized that if we could take advantage of the extraordinary functional compounds naturally found in tea, we could produce a tea beverage without the need of heat sterilization or flavor-altering additives. We resolved to create a product with a production method that was unparalleled worldwide.

But when we tried to get approval from the health department, they told us we must be crazy. Then we had the idea that perhaps we could turn our concept into a product if we built a factory where we could process tea by hand but still control microbes. It was around that time when we happened to hear about a course offered in Shizuoka—the tea capital of Japan—about technology to do just that, so we set out to Shizuoka. We talked to tea growers in Shizuoka about how we were trying to launch a tea product, despite having no funds and unsure whether we could get approval from the health department or even a loan from the bank to build a factory. The growers told us about the Japanese tea crisis they faced and were desperately hoping that we could change tea culture and the future of Japanese tea. So, we immediately set out to the birthplace of Shizuoka tea. When we tasted the hand-picked tea there, we were amazed. We learned about the historical background, geographical conditions, types of tea fields, cultivation methods, and color, taste, aroma, and aftertaste of tea, and were embarrassed how little we knew about authentic Japanese tea despite being born in Japan. We were beyond moved at how delicious authentic Japanese tea was.

We resolved to somehow obtain approval from the health department to turn our groundbreaking tea beverage concept into a product and get enough funding to at least build a factory with a clean room that would enable us to practice quality control under international standards. The bare minimum criteria for Royal Blue Tea tea leaves is that they are hand-picked. Hand-picked Japanese tea is very expensive, so turning that into a product would cost tens or hundreds of thousands of yen. Paying no mind to cost, we took on the challenge of developing a bottled tea with the intent to create a new, authentic tea culture by spreading it worldwide.

When Royal Blue Tea Japan was established, we drew the attention of tea producing areas across Japan, and met one of Japan’s leading tea growers, Masataka Ota, head of Kaneta Otaen tea farm and the Tenryu Tea Research Association. In 2008, we received a grant from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan, and got to work on developing the product. Masataka Ota has been awarded the prestigious Emperor’s Cup and Medal with Yellow Ribbon by the government of Japan for his accomplishments in making the previously unknown tea growing area of Tenryu world famous under his leadership and creating a culture and market for premium Japanese tea produced with advanced techniques. He has also been granted audience with the retired Emperor and Empress of Japan.

And that is the story of turning our concept to translate culture into business into a successful livelihood, and eventually landing in the spotlight of the business community today.

