



Israel's Global Spirit Buys Growing Boutique Tea Market

November 28, 2016 | By Eliana Rudee



About Food



Cérémonie teas on display.

Eliana Rudee

Walking down Yaffo Street in Jerusalem, it is impossible not to be impressed by Israel's diversity. A Filipino caregiver with a friendly smile pushes a white-haired man in his wheelchair. A Moroccan man leisurely sips his coffee as he watches passersby. An Orthodox Jewish mother shops with her three girls for new clothes. Two Arab-speaking teenagers chat endlessly as they wait to board the busy mid-day train. An Argentinian Taglit group waits in line to buy ice cream. An Ethiopian woman with oversized sunglasses pushes her wide-eyed baby in a stroller.

Indeed, Israel is the melting pot of the Middle East, the meeting point of the East and West — a truly international country. A great diversity of Eastern and Western influences are reflected in its culture, food — and even tea.

"We think of ourselves as the modern crossroads of the ancient spice routes," said Efrat Schorr, CEO of *Cérémonie Tea Ltd.*, a small Israeli boutique tea company. Schorr and her husband Eli bought the company four years ago from previous owners. *Cérémonie* makes its own tea blends from whole tea leaves, spices, herbs and flowers curated from all over the globe. Under the Schorr's new leadership and direction, the goal has been to grow the market in Israel and internationally while developing a gift market and ways to share tea through Duty Free.

In the ancient world, the spice routes were important for bringing the best flavors from Asia, Africa and Europe through Israel's Negev desert. Various archeological digs show remnants of Israel's spice routes traveled by convoys of hundreds of camels carrying spices. Israel acted, and continues to act, as the bridge between cultures and lands.



CEO Efrat Schorr at the Cérémonie Tea Factory in Migdal HaEmek, Israel.

Eliana Rudee

Although Israel's dry climate and low altitudes are not conducive to growing tea, its entrepreneurial and international spirit provides the perfect environment for blending teas from all over the world. The final product is magical: an exotic mix of flavors and aromas, also quite representative of Israel. The herbs are shipped from Croatia, Nigeria, Poland, Paraguay, Egypt, Argentina and Bulgaria. The tea comes from Sri Lanka, India and China. Even *Cérémonie's* factory exudes a sense of the international, with employees from the U.S., the Caucasus, India, Germany, Arab nations and Israel. "We have found that tea is the best vehicle to share cultures and flavors," Schorr said.

Cérémonie is the second-largest tea company in Israel, the first being *Wissotzsky*. Smaller companies include *Galilee Herbs* and *Tea Agamin*. While there are not many Israeli tea companies, the tea trade is growing. There is a large market for what's called "orthodox" tea, generally sold in the shuk. Orthodox tea leaves are whole leaves that are neither crushed nor ground. Stands sell loose tea from piles that are scooped into bags and bought by the pound.

Israel's boutique tea industry continues the spice traders' traditions of hospitality, openness and a sharing of cultures. For tea lovers in the Middle East, politics has nothing to do with tea partnerships. "We have customers, suppliers and by now friends who are Arabs living in all parts of Israel. Consumers view products with Hebrew and English as higher quality and with supervised health standards," said Schorr.

Jason Rozen, *Cérémonie's* master tea blender, added, "We work with a chain of coffee shops in Ramallah, and being that it's complicated to go into Ramallah for a guy like me [a Jewish Israeli], they meet me in northern Jerusalem, and on the side of the road they give me wads of cash and I give them boxes of tea. And they always invite me to the coffee shop," added Rozen. "This is totally a normal exchange."

According to Rozen, time after time — from roadside deals to trade shows — *Cérémonie* has found that businesspeople care about business; not politics. If it's a good product, people want it.

Because of its innovative and business-first attitude, international nature and geographical location, Israel could easily find itself someday at the forefront of the global tea industry — steeped in success.

Related



Artisanal Israeli Products at Your Doorstep

Michael Kaminer | August 26, 2016

Eliana Rudee is a fellow with the Haym Salomon Center and the author of the "Aliyah Annotated" and "Israel Girl" column for *JNS.org*. She is a graduate of Scripps College, where she studied international relations and Jewish studies. Her bylines have been featured in *USA Today*, *Forbes*, and *The Hill*. Find her on Instagram, @IsraelGirl48