

# Vancouver coffee company joins Thai tribal farmers to brew a better cup

Local entrepreneur partners with former opium growers in unique coffee co-operative

By Matthew Kadey

In the exotic - and notorious - Golden Triangle region of Thailand, the bucolic Doi Chaang village is nestled in the northwest's remote verdant mountains. Unbeknownst to most travelers absorbed instead in elephant rides and the carnival-like atmosphere of the nearby mountain town Pai, it's here where one forward-thinking Canadian company is helping bring to market the fairest cup of coffee of all.

Vancouverite John Darch was a successful businessman involved with potash mining in northern Thailand for more than two decades before being introduced to the Doi Chaang Akha hillside tribe in 2006.

There are about 80,000 colourfully-robed Akha living in Thailand's northern mountainous provinces. While most of this deeply superstitious and often downtrodden ethnic group do their best to eke out a living through destructive slash and burn agriculture and selling handicrafts to aloof tourists, the denizens of Doi Chaang were at the time already successfully growing and selling coffee.

"When I first went to the Doi Chaang Village I found this well organized group," recalls Darch, of his first meeting with the villagers. "The sense of purpose and pride they had was quite amazing."

In an effort to improve the fortunes of the hill tribes and eager for them to produce a profitable, more wholesome crop than the opium they'd been cultivating for 200 years, the King of Thailand in the early 1980s set forth a royal decree insisting that destitute tribal families be given coffee sprouts.

Lying on the lush slopes of the Doi Chaang mountain (meaning Elephant Mountain), Doi Chaang village is an ideal loca-



John M. Darch, co-chairman, Canada operations

tion for cultivating coffee because of its temperate 1,300 metre elevation, abundance of old forest growth, fresh flowing water and exceptional fertile soil.

During those humble beginnings, each Akha had to transport their beans on treacherous, mud-clogged roads 70 kilometres to Chiang Rai, the nearest city, where shady middlemen would pay them rock-bottom prices.

But when the indigenous community formed a co-operative called the Doi Chaang Fresh Roasted Company seven years ago it became impossible for the coffee dealers to play one family against another, and the farmers finally realized profit from their premium grade, single-estate beans.

The man who spearheaded the coffee cooperative is Thai businessman Wicha, who helped the villagers unite and form an independent company to represent all the Doi Chaang farmers.

"He's a little bit like a Napoleon in the way he is single minded and determined," says Darch, of the man who would later become president of his company's Thailand operations.

"I was so inspired by what I'd seen Wicha and the Akha people do without any assistance or donations from government, I thought I'd get behind

them. . . they needed an entrepreneur, a risk-taker if you will, to back them."

Darch decided to jump on an invitation to take some of the beans from the 800-family, 5000-acre co-op back to Canada to try and brew up North American interest among Starbucks and Horton devotees.

"Ultimately I saw there was more benefit in them running their own operations and me working on the other side in bringing their coffee to North America," Darch explains.

With the assistance of a



Wicha Promyong, president, Thailand operations

genically grown fair trade coffee beans.

Darch's company also gives the farmers 50 per cent ownership of the company at no cost to them, meaning that not only do the Akha earn good cash directly from their beans, but they make half of all the profit from the roasted coffee sold by the Canadian co-operation in 150 outlets in Canada and abroad.

"It's a different form of capitalism," explains the Vancouver entrepreneur. "Normally capitalism is about maximum return for minimum outlay.

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business partner and renowned roaster Shawn McDonald of Calgary, Darch traded in potash for java and started the Vancouver-based Doi Chaang Coffee Company. In doing so he presented the Akha with a unique partnership offer.

Today, the Doi Chaang Coffee Company buys its green beans from the Doi Chaang Akha for \$5.50 to \$6.50 USD per kilo, which is well in excess of the roughly \$3.30 USD that is required for or-

This was set up more as a venture to assist the Doi Chaang farmers in improving their living standards."

The advantage on his side, says Darch, is an uninterrupted supply of high-quality coffee.

While the Doi Chaang Coffee Company is able to keep its retail costs down by dealing directly with the farmers rather than bean brokers and overseas middlemen, Darch admits consumers of his coffee do pay a slight pre-

mium.

But, he says, today's coffee connoisseurs are prepared to pay that little extra for fair trade java.

Darch says that consumption of premium coffee in North America has moved through three distinct stages since Starbucks first introduced consumers to a better brew.

After that first wave of interest consumers began to look for local roasters and specialty coffees. Now, he explains, people who drink coffee want to know that the farmers who are harvesting the beans are being treated fairly.

Thanks to their unique Canadian-Thai partnership, the Akha have greatly improved their community living standards including improved access to safe drinking water and the construction of a new school, medical centre and the on-site Doi Chaang Coffee Academy.

At the Academy all hill tribe farmers are welcomed to attend, at no cost, to learn about cooperative business practices, diverse crop production, quality control and sustainable agriculture such as planting bird-friendly shade trees. The youth now see a viable future in the village and are no longer leaving Doi Chaang to be lost in big cities.

The Thai government has taken notice, calling the business a role model for other hill tribe communities. Curious tourists are even showing up eager to take part in eco-tourism with an agro twist.

"This was a remote area with no road going in," says Darch. "Now they have built a school to a standard that they even have students from overseas going there to study."

On the other side of the Pacific, the premium Arabica Doi Chaang roast has impressed the coffee elite. The Peaberry medium roast - Darch's personal favorite - scored an outstanding 93 points out of

a 100 in a blind tasting by the lauded *Coffee Review*, the most widely-read publication on specialty coffees. That ranks them in the top five per cent of medium roasts worldwide. According to Roast Master McDonald, the flavor of Doi Chaang, depending on roast, ranges "from smooth floral notes with a slight citrus finish, to an exotic rich dark roast with a hint of macadamia nut."

The Doi Chaang Coffee Company's organic, single-origin, fair trade beans are now found in 150 stores, primarily in Alberta and British Columbia with a presence in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Southern California and Britain.

Darch visits the villagers of Doi Chaang every two to three months, and has just returned from a cross-Canada tour with some of the Akha farmers.

"We visited various roasters across Canada and the reception has been extremely positive," he says. "The farmers felt the reception and the respect they received from everybody was very significant."

"Our story is compelling," quips Darch, ever the businessman. "But so is our quality."

