



Students Care About Where Your Tea Comes From A Dartmouth College Case Study



Yes, more college age adults are choosing tea over coffee.
Yes, iced tea sales are soaring while soda sales continue to decline.
Yes, tea is a profit-boosting menu addition for any dining program.
But none of these are the immediate reason Dartmouth College gives for choosing to serve its students Teatulia Organic Teas.

“It’s really about the story for us,” says Dartmouth’s Director of Dining Services, Jon K. Plodzick. “We are interested in partnering with food and beverage companies who have a story of how they are improving the planet. Teatulia has a great story—a wonderful story.”

The story Plodzick is referring to dates back to 2000, when social entrepreneur Kazi Shahid Ahmed had the idea to create jobs in an impoverished and barren region of Northern Bangladesh by starting an organic tea garden.

Almost two decades later Teatulia’s garden has restored thousands of acres of the ecosystem to fertile land teeming with wildlife. The garden’s farming co-op has lifted thousands of Bangladeshi families out of poverty by offering living wage jobs, organic farming training, and education programs. More than 3,000 women in the community also

benefit from a unique cattle-lending scheme, where they are loaned dairy cows in exchange for cattle dung fertilize the tea garden.

“Our innovative programs are making a huge impact on the lives of the Bangladeshi communities working in our tea garden, and our organic farming practices have literally changed the landscape of the area,” says Ahmed’s co-founder and Teatulia CEO Linda Appel Lipsius. “By sharing Teatulia’s story, we hope to expand people’s experiences as they learn about how we are doing things different and how good tea really can be,” she adds.

Organic is one important part of the story for Dartmouth Dining Services. Plodzick says students ask for organic and are very familiar with what it means. The fact that Teatulia cultivates its teas in its own organic garden using only natural



farming practices, with no chemicals or pesticides that harm the environment, makes it a tea students feel good about drinking.

Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance certifications are equally important when it comes to who Dartmouth Dining Services chooses as suppliers. Plodzick explains there is a culture of social economic considerations at Dartmouth. Students want to know the college is “doing the right thing” when it comes to the decisions they make about the products they bring on to campus. The concept of worker welfare—improving the socioeconomic conditions of disadvantaged groups in society—is important to the college and its students. Plodzick says there is a sentiment of, “If I have to pay more for a product if it means doing better for the world, I will.”

Dartmouth is on track to become a Fair Trade campus in some areas, and Dining Services is one department helping to lead the way. Students have become familiar with Fair Trade and what it

means through the dining program's commitment to serve only Fair Trade coffee. The fact that Teatulia's tea is grown in a Fair Trade garden—a model of sustainable, ethical trade that puts people and planet first—was an important factor in adding Teatulia to Dartmouth's menu.

Plodzik thinks students are less familiar with Rainforest Alliance certification, but it is an important term to him as a buyer. Plodzik understands how much a brand has to go through to earn this certification—meeting rigorous standards for sustainable agriculture that protects the habitat and the rights and well-being of farm workers. “To be honest, the fact that Teatulia has the Rainforest Alliance certification on their label lent a lot of credibility to the product and helped my buying decision,” he admits.

For Plodzik, these individual certifications aren't just labels; they add up to something bigger. “I like the fact that a brand is building something more than just selling stuff,” he explains.

What do the students think? Plodzik says Dartmouth students “love” Teatulia. How does he know? Take iced tea for example. Plodzik introduced fresh brewed Teatulia iced tea to one side of the main dining hall and quickly realized he needed to expand the popular beverage offering.

“I'm surprised we're able to sell iced tea year-round in the frozen tundra that is New Hampshire,” Plodzik says upon discovering that for students iced tea has no season. “Students will drink it whether it's 7 degrees or 70 degrees out,” he adds.

Plodzik now brews four Teatulia organic iced teas every day and offers iced tea on both sides of the dining hall. He changes up the flavors regularly to give students some variety. The favorite? “If I don't offer

the pomegranate I'm in big trouble,” he says half-jokingly.

Plodzik points out other ways he knows the tea program is successful. One has to do with what students are not saying. Plodzik says everyone has opinions when it comes to menu choices and students aren't afraid to speak up. For example, Plodzik has changed Fair Trade coffee vendors several times and each time there is something about the new coffee someone doesn't like. “It's the opposite with Teatulia,” he explains. “We've never had anyone criticize our Teatulia tea selection.”

Regular tea sampling events are another way Dartmouth can gauge student interest in Teatulia. Plodzik compliments Teatulia's New England Sales Representative, Andrew Porter, for engaging students with the brand. Porter says the conversations he has with students around tea is much more in-depth than with other products he samples; people are genuinely interested in the story. “It's eye-opening for students to realize there is an impact both environmentally and economically behind what they are consuming,” Porter explains.

Porter says the most eye-opening moment during his conversations with students is when they learn there is 100 percent traceability with Teatulia—everything comes from Teatulia's own garden. “Tea is only washed for the first time when it is brewed. If you don't know where it comes from, how do you know how it's been treated or what's in it?” he explains. Students connect with this.

In addition to product samplings with Teatulia staff, Plodzik takes advantage of Teatulia's brand messaging and marketing assets to convey the story where students purchase the tea.

Using photography and messaging provided by Teatulia, Plodzik created a branded area around the tea stations to share Teatulia's story. He's able to change out removable adhesive wall graphics to highlight different aspects of the Teatulia story—organic, sourced from a single Fair Trade tea farm, environmentally responsible, sustainable, giving back to the community, etc. Changing out the content ensures students learn about the story over time and don't tune out one singular message. Plodzik is a huge fan of this wall messaging because, “it's a low-cost solution for messaging that provides big brand impact.”

How the tea is presented also makes a big impact on sales.

“Few companies focus on the importance of packaging like Teatulia,” Plodzik comments. He's impressed that Teatulia not only creates visuals that are appealing to students but they also think of details like reducing waste by not including strings, tags, or staples on their tea bags.

The fresh brewed iced teas are served from modern beverage dispensers wrapped in colorful Teatulia branding. “Teatulia's iced tea marketing is clean looking, fresh, and vibrant. It really speaks to the quality of the tea,” explains Plodzik.

“I see a lot of value in creating branded content,” says Plodzik. To him it's “a double win.” Dartmouth is able to leverage the creative assets and story of a premium brand like Teatulia. In turn, this adds credibility to the college in terms of its food management priorities and makes a good impression for his dining services department. “I don't want to work with brands that don't add value to our dining program—Teatulia does,” concludes Plodzik.