

Turning over a NEW LEAF

Tea is planted mostly in the elevated hills of Nuwara Eliya, some three hours from the capital city Colombo

Dilmah, the world's third-largest brand of tea, is taking a stab at café culture with its t-series and is branching out into luxury tea holidays. **Sunita Sue Leng** had a cuppa in Sri Lanka, and is hooked.

Merrill J Fernando, 74, still puts in long hours at work every day. It's something the chairman of MJF Group, which owns the Dilmah brand, has been doing for 55 years. Yet, he is not tired of working in the tea business, he tells *The Edge Singapore*. Tall and trim, Fernando is seated in his spacious office in Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo, and has managed to squeeze me in for an interview after a long day of paperwork and meetings.

Fernando has turned Dilmah into the world's third-largest tea brand. MJF is the world's seventh-largest tea packer and Sri Lanka's leading exporter of value-added tea. In a world where tea has increasingly become blended beyond recognition, the man has sin-

gle-handedly put "Ceylon" back into tea. He should be kicking back, enjoying time with his four grandchildren and leaving the running of the business to his two sons, Dilhan and Malik (incidentally, Dilmah is a combination of their names).

But he's not. Tea is not a business for Fernando. It's a passion. He talks about its bouquet and aroma the way a wine lover would about wine. In fact, he's developed a Watte series, a selection of teas from the four premier tea-growing regions of Ceylon. Each tea has its own personality, he declares. He's even got wine connoisseurs and winemakers from Australia, New Zealand and Europe to come up with tasting notes on the teas.

Fernando was among the first batch of Sri Lankans trained by the British to be tea tasters. The British introduced tea to Sri Lanka in 1824. The industry thrived and Fernando got his break in the 1950s as an exporter of bulk tea. But by then, multinationals were squeezing small family companies out of business. Quality began to dip and the commoditisation of tea had begun.

So, he worked towards his own label but it wasn't smooth-sailing. When a socialist government came to power in the 1970s, he lost his tea plantation to nationalisation. Disillusioned, he thought about selling the business and emigrating. But he didn't. He stayed on and set up another tea-exporting company, then launched Dilmah as a premium tea in 1988.

Today, the brand is sold in more than 90 countries. Surpassed by only Lipton's and Twinings, it is the No 2 brand in Australia and No 1 in New Zealand. For the year to March 2005, the group's turnover should reach six

billion rupees (\$96 million).

Yet, Fernando isn't gunning for size. "We're not a mass-market brand," he says. He wants to stay an exclusive producer of unblended, high-grade Ceylon tea that's packed in the country where it's grown and picked. "Nowadays, the origin of tea is not disclosed. [Tea companies have] developed multi-origin blends. And the cheapest find their way into packets of tea," he laments.

Not content with becoming the champagne of teas, the family company is trying to make inroads into café culture the way coffee has — by jazzing up tea through its new t-series and t-bars. The brainchild of his younger son Dilhan, Dilmah's t-series is a funky collection of 39 varieties of gourmet leaf tea from all over the world. Packed in tins with eye-catching colours, it's being sold alongside accessories like Noritake porcelainware and crystallised gourmet sugar sticks at selected hotels and outlets.

The t-bars offer a dizzying array of t-cocktails, t-mocktails, t-shots and ice cream-t's. Fancy an Earl Grey ice cream t-shake? Or something stronger like a Vodka orange jasmine double shot? Better still, get the tea waiter to whip up a T56 — a titillating concoction of Galle district tea, Baileys and Grand Marnier, topped with a dancing flame (see "Tea with a Twist").

TEA WITH A TWIST: DILMAH'S T56 SHOOTER

- Brew 2g of Galle district Orange Pekoe tea in 20ml of hot water for four minutes
- Add 5ml of sugar syrup to the tea to make a thick solution
- Add 5ml of Baileys and then 5ml of Grand Marnier
- Flame the top layer and serve with a smile



A tea waiter whips up the t-cocktail



All in the family — Fernando and his four-year-old grandson, Amrit, taste tea together

Since t-bars hit the market 1½ years ago, tea has surprisingly made inroads into a coffee-dominated market — Italy. "We focused on Italy because it was a tough market for tea. Tea doesn't figure in the Italian language," says Dilhan. There are now 69 t-bars in Italy, with plans for a 70th in Turin this month, and three in Warsaw and one in Abu Dhabi.

Over the next two years, Dilhan hopes to open 16 in the UK, six in the Middle East, six in Japan and four in Canada. In Asia, he's looking at Singapore, Australia and New Zealand as well as India, which is, "in the longer term, an excellent market". In the next two months, Malaysia Airlines will start carrying the t-series on its flights.

Beyond this, Dilmah plans to branch out into gourmet food and tea matching, incorporating tea in fine dining, from starter to dessert. Meanwhile, Fernando's other son Malik, who heads the group's leisure division, is putting the finishing touches to Tea Trails, a luxury getaway in the tea plantations (see "On a Tea Trail").

The business may have come a long way but, in Fernando's mind, it is still comparatively small. "That's because we don't chase volume," he says. The company may be a boutique on the world stage but this master tea taster is a giant in the world of pure Ceylon tea. **E**

ON A TEA TRAIL

Three hours from bustling Colombo and some 5,000ft above sea level lies Nuwara Eliya, the serene tea-growing area of Sri Lanka. Here, Dilmah has restored four plantation houses at a cost of 125 million rupees (\$2 million). Those looking to experience the colonial heritage of the island's tea culture will be pleased to know that the 20 luxurious rooms feature antique period furniture and décor, with claw-footed Victorian bathtubs in the bathrooms.

Tea Trails, as the estate is called, will also offer formal tea-tasting ceremonies and tea tours. And, for a modern dose of pampering, there's a spa with tea-based treatments. But it's not all lounging about, drinking tea amid the sprawling tea hills. Visitors can take a dip in its two swimming pools, go hiking and mountain biking or even opt for some bird watching. For more on Tea Trails, which opens next month, visit www.teatrails.com.