



THE *Tea Lady's* TAKEOVER

Feeling unfulfilled, **Jennifer Commins** took a risk to pursue her passion – and now she’s sparking a taste revolution, one cup of tea at a time

BY SYDNEY LONEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIAN RICHARDS

It's late on an overcast afternoon, and Jennifer Commins and Bill Redelmeier are sitting at a long oak table with four warm (but not steaming) cups of tea between them. The setting is Southbrook Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., and Bill, its owner, wears the mud-splattered shoes of a farmer and the shrewd, unblinking gaze of a businessman. Against a backdrop of wine barrels and grapevines, Jennifer is demonstrating how, as with wine, different flavours in tea open up at different temperatures. “If tea is too hot, you can’t taste its subtle nuances,” she explains.

It’s been nearly a year since Jennifer left a lucrative job selling designer office furniture in Toronto. “After studying interior design I sort of fell into the business, and once I was in, it was hard to get out because the money was so good,” she says. But Jennifer was desperate

for a more creative outlet – and she found it in tea. Now, the 38-year-old spends much of her time peddling tins of hand-blended teas from the trunk of her silver Saab to restaurants and wineries across southern Ontario.

She named the bespoke tea company she launched last spring Pluck (high-quality tea leaves are “plucked” by hand), but when you share a pot of tea with her, the name resonates for a different reason. Jennifer’s open, honest face with its smattering of freckles masks some serious moxie: She has no intention of leaving Southbrook until she’s added the winery to a growing list of conquests, one that includes luxury hotels and the kind of restaurants that require reservations weeks in advance. Although Bill makes a perfectly respectable living selling wine, Jennifer is already well on her way to convincing him that he needs to be selling tea too. ▶

TEA FOR TWO?
Pluck founder
Jennifer Commins and
Southbrook Winery’s
Bill Redelmeier
join forces.



Her timing couldn't be better. It's not that tea is new (tea came to Canada in 1716, courtesy of the Hudson's Bay Company), it's just that only recently has it been considered trendy to drink it. "We used to see tea as a cheap beverage, something that came in bags," Jennifer says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "But there's a growing tea culture in Canada and we're just on the edge of discovering all the things it can do."

For Jennifer, tea has always been more than bits of dried leaves floating in water; she believes every cup should tell a story. Thanks to some artful blending, a sip of one of her teas captures a perfect sense of time and place, like her popular Spadina Avenue Blend (mango, lime, lemon grass and coconut), which evokes the flavours found in the fragrant, haphazard stalls of its namesake street in Toronto's Chinatown.

The amazing things Jennifer does with tea have already attracted attention. When Pharrell Williams came to town to launch a new label at Holt Renfrew last summer, it was Jennifer who was commissioned to make the rapper one of his favourite drinks, iced tea. "I blended a star anise chai lemonade that went over really well," she says. And when the Shangri-La Hotel in Toronto hosted a Burberry event, it called Jennifer to create a tea befitting the brand. The result was Vanilla Rose. "I was inspired by the tartan: Black equals tea, red equals rose petals from Tuscany, white equals vanilla—and when you add a splash of milk, it turns the colour of a Burberry trench."

Jennifer's tea training began in childhood, when she'd visit her grandmother's cottage on Ontario's Georgian Bay and be sent out to the herb garden with a pair of scissors. "I'd come back with handfuls of mint, sage and thyme, and we'd boil them all up and have little tea parties," she says. Her British-born father, Alistair, was also instrumental, although he took a more regimented approach with a nightly ritual that began with pre-warming the cups and ended with a plate of Peek Freans. But perhaps the greatest influence of all was Jennifer's mother, Patricia, who went into recovery for alcohol addiction when her daughter was eight. She is now 29 years sober. "My mom has been a huge inspiration for me," Jennifer says. Her mother's history is one of the driving forces behind Jennifer's mission to put quality tea on restaurant menus. "We'll go out for amazing dinners where she'll spare no expense for good food, but then the only drink options are ginger ale, because it's the 'grown-up' pop, or Perrier. There's nothing that matches the food. I think there's a place for something better, and a social responsibility too."

The paucity of non-alcoholic options in fine dining was a problem Jennifer first noticed in her 17 years in the furniture business, when she courted clients at some of Toronto's best restaurants. Often the only downside to

these dinners came at the end, when she'd order a cup of tea. "I'd get either a blank stare or a look of panic, and the server would mutter, 'We have mint, camomile or black.'" While her dinner companions were presented with artfully crafted cappuccinos, she'd get a stainless steel pot filled with tepid water and a tea bag on the side. "They were trying to be fancy, but a bag in a mug with water poured over it actually makes a better cup of tea," she says. "It's always better to add water to tea, never tea to water. The whole experience was just something I filed away in my mind."

Eventually, Jennifer decided it was up to her to rescue restaurant tea service from its culinary backwater, so she enrolled in the tea sommelier program at the Tea Association of Canada in 2012. Although she'd dabbled with blending the loose teas she found in dusty health food shops and Chinatown markets while at university ("the only places you could find them back then"), becoming a tea sommelier was something else entirely. Now,

Jennifer can taste a tea and tell you the type, region and processing style. She can also talk tea and food, whether it's about integrating tea as an ingredient (Lapsang souchong makes a great smoky marinade) or what you should consider when pairing tea with different dishes. "Creamy foods pair well with black teas and mellow the tannins, the way cheese does with red wine," she says. "While an astringent tea, like Darjeeling, is best served with sweet dishes."

The idea of pairing tea with food has been on Jennifer's mind since she started her business. "I want to have educated discussions with chefs about what's on their menus, and how I can create teas to match."

During her years in design, she took several chef-training classes on the side, even studying how to make sushi. "It was amazing—in the end we were breaking down whole fish. I love that kind of stuff." She briefly considered a career in cooking, but by then she had a family and couldn't find a way to reconcile her passion for the restaurant industry with parenting a busy toddler. It became even less feasible when her marriage disintegrated and she found herself a single mother. "The kitchen environment isn't a particularly mom-friendly one. The hours are long and it's a lifestyle that just seemed too decadent and selfish for me to want to be a part of it." Tea presented the perfect solution.

Jennifer's plan for Pluck is to convince chefs and restaurateurs that she can offer their patrons a better cup of tea. But, as anyone who's ever waited tables can attest, nobody likes a tea drinker. "They linger at the table over their 10-cent tea bags, and the perception is they're a *different* sort," she says. Still, Jennifer felt that if she could help restaurants create a proper tea service, with steeping guidelines, tasting charts and a better product, tea drinkers would order more—and more expensive—cups of tea. This was her sales pitch, and it worked. >

*When
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SHE'S GOT PLUCK

From left: One of Jennifer's magical blends; Jennifer taking on the wine world; her Lapsang Souchong Savoury Shortbread Cookies (for the recipe, visit chatelaine.com/pluck).



"I called a restaurant I'd made a lot of reservations at over the years and said, 'I've started this company and it would be my pleasure to come in and do a tea tasting with you.'" It was hard for them to say no, she says, and so they didn't. With Jennifer, no conversation is likely to end without a proper cup of tea. Next, she approached Soho House in Toronto, a British-style private club whose beverage manager hadn't heard from his own tea supplier in months. Jennifer went in armed with her teapot, and the club made the switch to Pluck. Another early supporter was Toronto chef Jamie Kennedy, whom she won over with her commitment to using local ingredients. "Jennifer has such enthusiasm and great attention to detail," Kennedy says. "I strive for excellence in all I do in my restaurants, and serving tea is no exception, so it was a natural fit." His favourite tea is her camomile – largely because she took the time to track down a local grower.

"This is what I love about what I do," Jennifer says. "Talking with someone like Jamie Kennedy about trying to get more local product in my tea inspires me. And it's a major challenge because tea companies don't typically do that. But when you taste the teas side by side, the one with local ingredients looks and tastes different – it's fresher and more beautiful."

Jennifer sources cranberries from Native reserves in northern Ontario and lavender from Prince Edward County Lavender Farm – she showed up one day and got a tour and now occasionally joins the owners, Rolande and Derek, for singalongs with her ukulele. "I love visiting the farm. They have vineyards on their property too, because if lavender grows well, grapes grow well." The lavender she gets from the farm is about 10 times the price of what she could buy in conveniently vacuum-sealed bags with a long shelf life. "But that's not what I want to do," she says firmly.

Her hunt for local suppliers is what led her to Southbrook, after she discovered the winery's red-grape-skin powder at a farmers' market. "It's a little sour, a little grapey, both things you can work with as a tea ingredient. So then the challenge – and I love a challenge – became what to put with it to make it delicious." Jennifer blended the antioxidant-rich powder with apples and dried berries and brought

the resulting teas to Southbrook for Bill to taste. "The grape skins are such a romantic, wonderful, beautiful story – my two favourite beverages, wine and tea, coming together," she says.

As it happens, Bill is also fond of tea. He even puts it on his vines in lieu of pesticide. "It sounds weird, but it works," he says. "And it's so safe that you can wear a bathing suit while spraying it." Southbrook was the first organic, biodynamic winery in Canada; sheep graze in the vineyard to fertilize the vines, and the phases of the moon determine when it's time to plant and harvest. "The fact he sprays his vines with tea was a revelation," Jennifer says. "It's so rich within the context of food and ethics and being forward-thinking, the way I'm trying to be."



The biggest similarity between wine and tea tastings is that both are sampled from lightest to heaviest. Jennifer began her Southbrook tasting with a rosy-hued hibiscus, using a stainless steel spoon (silver can affect the taste) to ladle a little into everyone's personal tasting spoon. A lively discussion ensued on proper slurping etiquette, and the merits of putting milk in first or after.

Tea drinkers can get uppity about these things, Jennifer says. "It can be quite intimidating. For a nation that grows no tea, the British have the most rigid rules around serving it: which direction the spout should face, how many times to stir, how many inches your cup can be from your saucer. I'm more interested in the creativity of tea and focusing on blends with exceptional ingredients." In 1946, George Orwell wrote an essay outlining 11 rules for making a perfect >



PERFECT PAIRING

"Jennifer won me over with her 'we will make this work' attitude," says Southbrook Winery owner Bill Redelmeier. "Her teas really resonated with me, even though I'm a 'wine guy.'"



cup of tea—Jennifer has only three. Use quality leaves, and steep them in warm water (for white and green teas, she lets the kettle sit for three minutes after boiling). Then, depending on the tea, steep for two to five minutes.

Jennifer dreams of one day opening a blend-it-yourself tea bar, "like a *parfumerie*, but with tea." For now, she does all her blending in a 1,700-sq.-ft. studio loft in Toronto that was once a jam factory. "I'm a small-batch blender," she says. "I blend two kilos at a time, while larger companies get their tea pre-blended in India or China and can do hundreds of kilos at once. I prefer to have total control over what I'm putting out there."

After her success in restaurants and wineries, Jennifer's next battleground is the boardroom. "Any time you drink tea in a meeting, you've got this wet bag leaking onto your saucer, which then drips onto your shirt from the bottom of the cup." Her solution is drip tea steeped in a standard coffee brewer. "The hardest part was finding teas that don't have flavour-transfer issues with coffee. I played with it a lot and created four blends: an orange pekoe, an Earl Grey, a lemon-ginger and a chocolate-mint rooibos. You just pour the pre-measured packs into a coffee filter and hit the brew button, and you get a pot of tea for the entire office."

This latest endeavour is thanks, in part, to Jennifer's husband, Evan. Evan, ironically, is in the coffee business. As a sales manager for Imperial Coffee, he helped her work out the prototype for drip tea. "He has been my biggest supporter and harshest critic," Jennifer says. They met at a bar seven years ago, when they were each waiting for

a friend to arrive for dinner. By the time said friends turned up, the two were deep in conversation, sparking a covert flurry of texts. Should their respective dinners be postponed? The answer from both was an unequivocal yes. "We got a table to ourselves and just started talking, I don't know about what, for six hours," Jennifer says. Eventually, they decided to merge their families (Evan's daughters were 11 and 15 at the time; Jennifer's son, Alexander, was three). "I didn't know anything about raising teenage girls. In the early stages of our relationship, it would have been easy for them to shut the whole thing down. But they were so open and willing to give it a shot." Kari, now 21, interned at Pluck last summer, but Jessi, 17, steadfastly remains a Red Rose drinker. "She wishes me well, but she's taken a stand," Jennifer says. "And that's totally fine—everyone works out their own tastes when it comes to tea."

Back at Southbrook, the tea tasting has morphed into a wine tour. Inside a large steel building a honey-coloured dog laps up stray drops of cab franc from the concrete floor. The air is thick with the scent of fermenting grapes. Bill leads Jennifer up metal stairs that feel as sticky as the floor of a movie theatre, and the two of them peer down into a massive, 80-hectolitre oak barrel, its sides stained purple. "The wine ages for a year in the barrel and the oak helps set the flavour," Bill says. When the conversation drifts too far into wine country, Jennifer deftly steers it back to tea, explaining that some teas are aged too. Pu-erh tea from China is often aged for decades and can cost thousands of dollars. "Chinese medicine prizes it for its digestive properties, which is why it's often served at dim sum," she says. She blends the earthy tea with cocoa nibs, creating a tea that tastes like dessert.

In the end, Jennifer delivered 50 tins of Southbrook Berry Blend and Southbrook Apple Spice to the winery. They sold fast, and now she's just waiting for the 2013 grape skins to arrive so she can blend more. "I didn't set out to be on a winery menu, but once I got my hands on those grape skins, I was hooked on the idea," she says. There are some days, though, when tea is a tough sell. "Just yesterday, I visited one of my restaurants and enjoyed a wonderful meal, only to be offered coffee at the end. *And they knew I was the tea lady.*" Still, Jennifer believes we're finally at a place where people are prepared to pay for a better cup of tea. "Can you imagine if you were at a dinner party and someone brought out the Maxwell House? It just wouldn't happen. We can't drink poor-quality coffee anymore—and I think tea is finally going through that same revolution." ©

