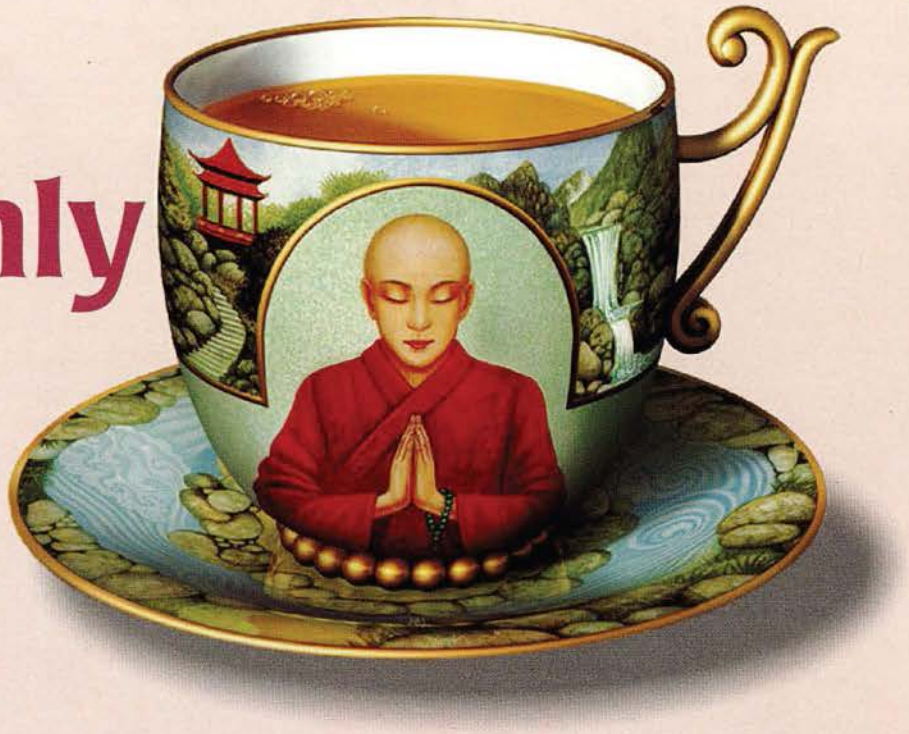
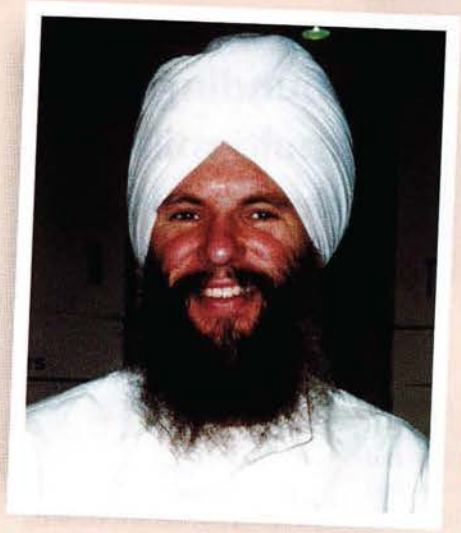
A Heavenly Aroma





The author at an early trade show representing Yogi Tea.

Sada Sat Singh tells the story of Yogi Tea, from the very first cup

I had my first cup in June of 1970.

There was a most wonderful aroma permeating Ahimsa Ashram in Washington, D.C., and I was absolutely captivated by it... it was exotic, spicy, mystical, and at the same time familiar, comforting. After Kundalini Yoga class, the teachers—Roger and Carolyn—served the delicious concoction that gave forth this fragrance.

They called it Yogi Tea. "Cute name," I thought as I drank it down. By my second cup, I was having further thoughts: "What is this stuff? Where does it come from? Where can I get it?" Carolyn was happy to share the recipe, which she quickly rattled off: cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, black pepper, ginger root, and a pinch of black tea, declaring, "This will cure anything that ails ya."

"Great," I said. " Could you give that recipe again a little more slowly?" Now I only had to learn what "cardamom" was, and where I could dig up some ginger root. You certainly couldn't find it in Safeway circa 1970. And Whole Foods was still decades away.

At that time, the tea was known only to the few in the fledgling Kundalini Yoga community called 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization). It was affectionately called Yogi Tea after Yogi Bhajan, the master of Kundalini Yoga, who always served it in his household, and shared the recipe with his students.

Soon, there were 3HO Kundalini Yoga Ashrams in just about every major U.S. city, and wherever there was Kundalini Yoga, there was Yogi Tea. Every Ashram was filled with the aroma as students were introduced to this enchanting brew. People coming into those early 3HO Ashrams were always asking the same question I did: "What is that heavenly smell?"



The early 3HO community was a spirited, energetic and creative group. Beards and turbans in the early '70s in America and Europe seriously limited one's job opportunities, so for many, self-employment became the way to go. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention, and one of the cornerstones of the Kundalini Yoga community in those days was the growing network of Golden Temple Conscious Cookery Vegetarian Restaurants. By 1972 I was living in Panj Piare Ashram in Baltimore. We were known for always serving Yogi Tea after class and to visitors. We used to go to the Golden Temple Restaurant in Washington, D.C., just for fun to help out in the kitchen because it was such a happening scene right off Dupont Circle. By 1973 I had moved to Ahimsa Ashram in Washington, D.C., and started managing the Golden Temple. Then, in 1974, Yogi Bhajan asked me to move out to Los Angeles to run the Golden Temple Restaurant there.

By the mid Seventies, more people were becoming interested in healthy eating and natural foods. At the Golden Temple Restaurant, no coffee was served; so if you wanted a hot, satisfying beverage, the choice was either Yogi Tea or Yogi Tea. In the restaurants, the first thing made every day was gallons of the stuff to meet the demand of customers.

We were an enterprising lot, and soon many of the restaurants were selling Yogi Tea spices in bulk with the recipe attached. The Golden Temple Conscious Cookery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the first to develop a commercial product in the U.S. in 1976. I can remember being disappointed that they beat us to the punch because we really believed that in L.A. we made the best Yogi Tea. But we were still happy that they did it and rooted for their success. We all sold it in our restaurants. It was a cute package: loose Yogi Tea spices (cinnamon, ginger root, cardamom, cloves and black pepper) in little cellophane bags. The label—a Yogi in a spinal twist posture drinking a cup of Yogi Tea—was a little ahead of its time. The tea business ended up being sold to a small enterprise north of Baltimore, Maryland, called Tommy's Tea Shop and the commercial Yogi Tea venture all but disappeared from the scene.

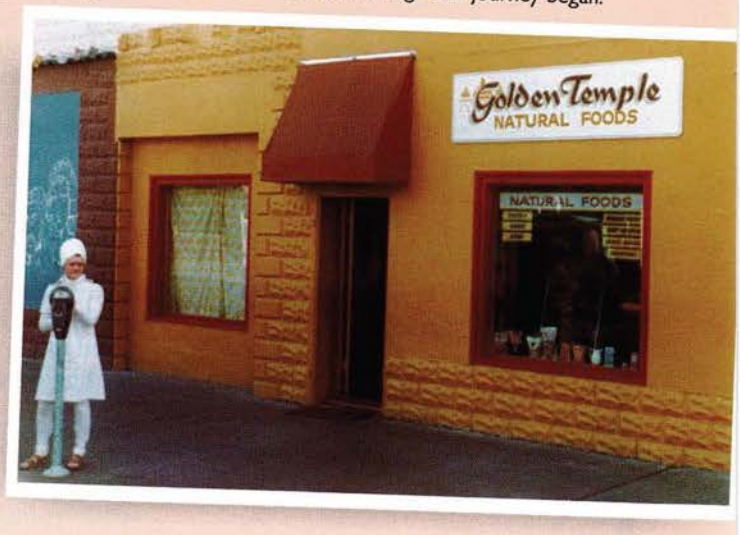
In 1983, I started working on Yogi Tea recipes, because we could no longer buy the packaged Yogi Tea anywhere and I knew we could sell it—at the very least—out of our restaurant. Unbeknownst to me, my future partners—Ranbir Singh and Guru Simran Singh—wanted to do the same thing. The three of us lived in Los Angeles and worked together at the Golden Temple Restaurant on 3rd Street, and the Golden Temple Natural Foods Store on La Cienega Boulevard. In conversation with them one day I figured out the three of us were all pursuing the same idea independently of each other. Since I knew we would have greater success together than individually, I suggested that we get together and talk about joining forces.

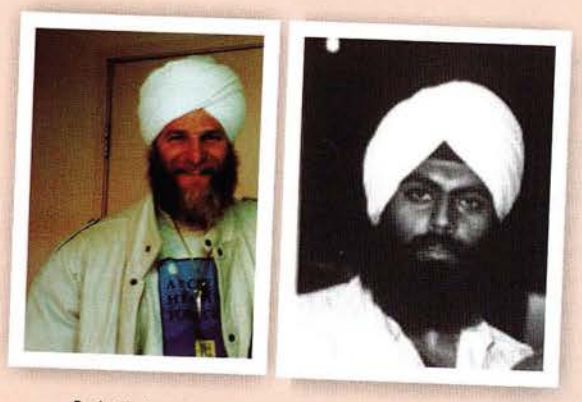
The three of us officially started our business over breakfast in a Coco's Restaurant on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. We pooled our available resources, which at the time was $540; hired Seva Kaur to design the label; and bought brown paper coffee bags and bulk Yogi Tea spices. Soon we had tea that we were selling in our restaurant, store, and other local health food stores under the name—what else?—"Golden Temple Tea Company." We ran the business out of the back storeroom of the Golden Temple Natural Foods store on La Cienega Blvd. We used to mix our concoction by rolling 100 pound barrels of spices up and down the alley behind the store. Then we would fill our little bags by hand, slap the label on, and deliver them. In those days, we all had other full time jobs so we ran the tea business in the evenings and on Saturday mornings.

At the same time, Tarn Taran Singh and Tarn Taran Kaur of Hamburg, Germany had started a company in Europe called "Yogi Tee." So we learned some recipe refinements from them, developed our first truly commercial Yogi Tea product, and worked things out so that they had the rights for Europe and we had the rights for North America, both under license from Yogi Bhajan.

"We used to mix our concoction by rolling 100 pound barrels of spices up and down the alley behind the store."

The restaurant where Yogi Tea's journey began.





Sada Sat's partners, Guru Simran Singh (L) and Ranbir Singh (R).

Slowly the business grew. By 1984 we had graduated from our little brown bag to a four-color printed box of bulk Yogi Tea in three flavors (Original, Almond and Carob Mocha). I remember going to the Natural Foods Merchandiser Expo in Los Angeles with Yogi Bhajan in January 1985. He took me directly to the Celestial Seasonings booth. He stood there, looked at the booth, then looked at me and said, "Get busy. One day soon we'll have more teas than they do and we'll be one of the biggest tea companies in the world." He looked at me closer and then said, "Yogi Tea is magic."

"Yogi Bhajan took me directly to the Celestial Seasonings booth. He said, 'Soon we'll have more teas than they do and we'll be one of the biggest tea companies in the world.'"

Charged with the glorious predictions of our teacher, and the "get busy" injunction, we pushed out across the country only to find that most of America wasn't quite ready for us. When we would call on stores and told them we were from Yogi Tea, we would often get the Yogi Bear jokes—"and where's BooBoo?"—accompanied by much laughter. In other places we'd hear, "Boy, I can tell you're real nice and all that, but I can tell ya, this is the Bible Belt and we don't do that yoga down here." So we knew that "soon" didn't mean "now"; it was just a matter of how soon "soon" was.

In 1986, there was a great development. We figured out how to put Yogi Tea in a tea bag. We still sold our original bulk tea but now we also had a product that people could have ready to drink in 3 to 4 minutes rather than waiting 20 to 25 for their big batch of Yogi Tea to boil. The convenience factor was a huge success with our customers and it created unprecedented demand for the product. Consumers and stores started asking for it and we actually had a little "buzz" going on about Yogi Tea.

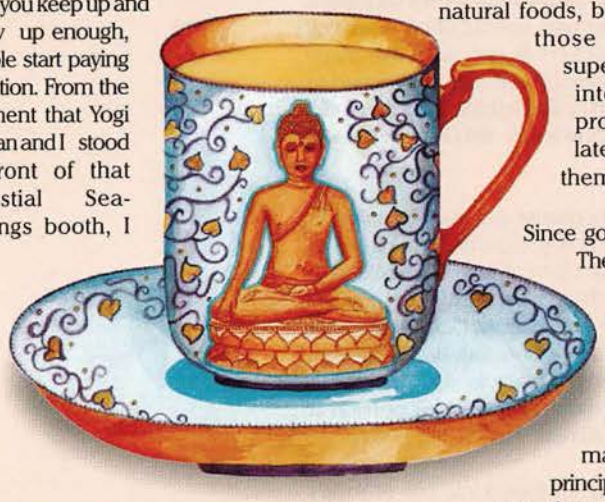
Another innocently "genius" thing we did was to put a Kundalini Yoga posture and its benefit on the top of each box. Friends and marketing experts told us we were making a big mistake taking such a "risk." They said America just wasn't ready for a food product with yoga postures on it and that we were putting too much of our personal agenda out there. They said that only people who did yoga would be interested and you don't want to be limited to such a small market. Well, Guru Simran and I figured that since we did yoga, wore turbans, and used a name like Yogi Tea, there was nothing subtle about us, either. We also knew that it was important to differentiate ourselves from all the other tea products out there. We had some success with our product, so we said, "Lets share what's at the heart of our company." We figured that being true to ourselves would win us loyal customers, so the postures stayed. Little did we know that over the next eighteen years yoga would become one of the fastest growing health disciplines in the world; and with a name like Yogi Tea, with yoga postures on the box, we were suddenly speaking to millions of new consumers.

A few years later, more magic hit. We were about to come out with a line of organic single herb teas. Before taking the product to market, I wanted to get Yogi Bhajan's input. I met with him and he basically said, "This won't work," and he gave me a book on Ayurveda.* He also said, "Don't forget your roots." It became pretty clear to me that we should stick to products based on yoga and Ayurveda.*

Later he also told me, "It's too early to go organic. You won't be able to get enough certified organic raw materials. You'll have supply problems and your customers will be unhappy." So we actually did some market research for the first time and found that indeed healing formula teas would sell. We came up with a secondary line called "Ancient Healing Formulas" and Guru Simran Singh began conducting Ayurvedic seminars at health food stores and health food shows. We struck a nerve and after being in business more than seven years, started to experience "overnight success." We had a product that people wanted and we were fortunate to be part of an industry that was growing over 25% every year. We continued to ride that wave of growth to become a major seller of natural healing teas throughout the U.S. We were no longer those odd guys in the turbans with the weird product but a company whose products consumers demanded. It had been a long time since we'd heard somebody say, "Where's BooBoo?"

"It has been a long time since we've heard somebody say, 'Where's BooBoo?'"

As a young struggling company we certainly had our challenges: Everything from debating with the FDA the claim that "herbs heal" (we lost that one), to the usual cash flow issues, to the political violence in Guatemala preventing our cardamom shipments. But we always knew that if we kept at it, we'd get to where we wanted to be. As Yogi Bhajan had continuously said since 1969, "Keep Up and you'll be kept up." We applied the mantra to our business every day and used the simple principle of showing up. If you keep up and show up enough, people start paying attention. From the moment that Yogi Bhajan and I stood in front of that Celestial Seasonings booth, I knew that Yogi Tea would be a success. My teacher said it was so, and he never lied to me. I'm a child of the '60s and there's a song by Graham Nash that says, "We can change the world, rearrange the world," and I knew we could do it even if it was one cup of Yogi Tea at a time.



In the early '90s Yogi Tea took the next step toward its destiny. Yogi Bhajan got a group of Khalsa business people together and said that we should all figure out how to work together. We were a diverse group representing a number of enterprises from food manufacturing, to marketing, sales and accounting services. What came from those meetings was the merger of our companies into Golden Temple of Oregon, Inc. with its subsidiaries: Golden Temple Natural Cereals, Peace Cereals, Yogi Tea, Sunshine Spa Natural Body Care Products and others. From individual companies we became unified, sharing our talents and resources. It gave us the capacity to grow at a rate that, alone, we would not have been able to do.

Each of us now had new roles and responsibilities and new titles. I became Sr. VP of Sales and Marketing and was mostly selling cereals to supermarkets. It was quite a different arena from natural foods, but over time, even those old stodgy supermarkets became interested in natural products; and by the late '90s, I was getting them to buy Yogi Tea.

Since going organic in 1997, The Yogi Tea Company has been a leader in the growing organic food industry, producing organic pro-ducts and maintaining fair trade principles in its purchasing pra-ctices. The comp-any also works with local growers around the world helping them deve-lop their capacities and commitment to organic farming. Yogi Tea reaches millions of people all over the world with teas made in its manufacturing facilities in Eugene, Oregon and Bologna, Italy, and is now the largest tea company in the world based on organic ingredients.

Yogi Tea is one of Yogi Bhajan's greatest business accomplishments, and undoubtedly our community's greatest impact on the mainstream consciousness. Yogi Tea's "magic" is rooted in its mission to bring yogic technology to consumers through its products, packaging and marketing, even down to the messages from Yogi Bhajan printed on the tag of each tea bag.



Yogi Bhajan leading a meeting at Yogi Tea.

It's amazing to think that a humble cup of tea has exposed so many people to a new world, and led a select few of them to an entirely new life, me included. Even as I write these words—sitting in the farmhouse kitchen of our country yoga retreat in Umbria, Italy, enjoying the view of the valley below—I'm sipping a cup of my favorite: Green Tea with Kombucha. And I can't help but reflect that I have been delivered here—to this moment and this place—by that very first cup, over thirty years ago. AT

■ In 1970 Sada Sat Singh began studying Kundalini Yoga with Yogi Bhajan. Co-founder of the *Yogi Tea Company*, he is a yogic herbalist and nutritionist. He lives with his wife, Sada Sat Kaur, at their yoga retreat center, Casa di Guru Ram Das at Borgo I Frati in Lama, Italy, and currently spends his time teaching Kundalini Yoga and training Kundalini Yoga Teachers in the U.S. and Europe.

*See Glossary, pages 91-92.