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Tea-riffic

Tavalon Tea Co. CEO is changing American's perception of tea BY TYLER MCAVOY ('12)

When you think about tea, what comes to mind? Perhaps it's a gorgeous Chinese panorama, dotted with hills and fields tended by farmers. Maybe tea evokes a European garden party with ladies hold-

ing laced umbrellas, men in top hats and a Baroque melody playing softly in the background. For some it's a soothing cup of Earl Gray mixed with honey, a remedy for a sore throat on a snowy day.

For many people, tea isn't an everyday beverage. It's either foreign or a remedy when we catch a cold.

John-Paul Lee ('01) wants to change these perceptions.

After graduating from JMU's College of Business with a degree in computer informational systems, Lee began work for Accenture, an international management and consulting company. Starting in New York City and later transferring to London, Lee began feeling restless, as if he had to do something more.

"I had to get out of the rat race," he says. "I had to have my own business."

Lee's entrepreneurial spirit kicked into high gear. At 26 he quit his job and sold everything to start Tavalon Tea Co. He sold his house, his car and liquidated all of his stock options, and then, with a business partner and a whole lot of luck, co-founded the company in New York City. Now the CEO is proud to say that Tavalon Tea is sold in more than 400 restaurants and more than 500 department stores including Bloomingdale's. The company has grown from a New York craze to a serious international business with a second office in South Korea.


"I want to bring the perspective of tea in America from pinky in the air to new, young and fresh," Lee says.

Lee credits much of his success to JMU's College of Business, and says its emphasis on collaboration has been crucial to his success. "It helps build a network and cultivates you in an environment to excel in people skills," explains Lee.

Former JMU College of Business Dean Robert Reid was impressed with Lee as a student. "He was always very focused and very driven," recalls Reid. "Odds are slim of starting a business when you're that young. But Lee's drive is certainly uncommon."

Reid believes that the College of Business' focus on what some people call "soft skills," which Reid defines as leading and communicating, is the most important facet of business. "You aren't going to get a job with technical competence alone," says Reid. "The ability to lead and motivate is just as important."

As John-Paul Lee's list of accolades grows, he proves the JMU College of Business formula works. Lee has been recognized as a business leader by the Asian American Business Development Center and was honored with the 2010 Outstanding 50 Asian Americans in Business Award. In 2011, the U.S./Pan Asian American Chamber of Commerce bestowed Lee with the

Top 10 Asian American Business Award for his accomplishments as a young entrepreneur. In September 2011, Lee was selected as a member of the Entrepreneurial Sounding Board Committee for Columbia University's Business School, and in October 2011 he was honored with a board seat committee for the Asian American Business Development Center. 

* Learn more at www.tavalon.com/blog



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