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TO THE TEA

ANKUR BORWANKAR

HER family has been in the tea industry for three generations and she is now one of India's only two women tea auctioneers.

While her entire family has been growing fine Darjeeling blends at their plantation for over a century, Mridul Tiwari is the first taster and auctioneer in the line; using her expertise and extensive family history to make a mark in the male-dominated enterprise of tea auctioning. Jaipur-based Tiwari was in the city for the launch of a new infused ayurvedic range of teas.

At any auction, she would invariably be the only woman in a room of 250 screaming men as she sold hundreds of kilograms of tea leaves, affording her an auctioneer's unique calm. "I could never get pally with a

buyer or put my arm around him and offer him a drink with his purchase - it was strictly business. And I could never be too austere with them, because that wouldn't be good business," she remarks.

When asked whether she has ever lost her cool during an auction, she replies, "Never, but the buyers have, several times. I remember during one auction, a dog and a monkey walked into the room and onto stage. I had to stop and yell for them to be taken off, the only time I stopped an auction. I would have continued, but they didn't look like

they were going to buy anything."

Tiwari's own brand Kamelia can be found in leading hotels across the country, and she reveals plans to enter the retail market. Her secret is to use whole leaves of the tea plant instead of "tea dust", which lends the tea a full aroma, body, colour and taste.

"India is the largest producer of tea, it is the largest consumer, and yet we do not give a thought about the low quality brew we drink. Why not treat tea the way we taste wine? Indians must educate

themselves about tea, they must learn and respect the drink, and must not settle for standard blends," she firmly asserts.

While Tiwari does not conduct tea-tasting sessions of her own, she has lectured at many workshops. "It's a personal thing, the brew you choose. Nobody else has the exact same blend, and nobody else can make it like you can," she states. According to her, 'tea and cake' sessions would make a suitable replacement for wine & cheese, although this culture is yet to be bred. "It is a healthier option with greater interaction between the taster and the brew," she adds.

Tea auctions are no longer held in halls with tens of unemployed men, but have now donned the civilised mask of internet bidding. Asked whether she would return to hosting auctions in those same rooms if the opportunity presented itself, the answer is a definitive yes.



ARUL HORIZON

