

For this installment of the “Great Minds Think a Lot” series, we sat down with Lisa McDonald, internationally trained tea sommelier and owner of Ann Arbor businesses, TeaHaus and Eat More Tea. We discussed her upbringing, parenting while being a business owner, her unplugging policies, and forthcoming ventures for both businesses.

TeaHaus, located in Ann Arbor’s Kerrytown, is one of the city’s premier tea specialty shops, having over 175 teas in their collection. Its sister company, Eat More Tea, offers tea-related items such as tea-based culinary spice blends, French macarons, and multi-course meals. Check out this interview between Destination Ann Arbor staff member Antonio and tea sommelier, Lisa.

Antonio: Thank you for deciding to join me. To give a proper introduction, this is Miss Lisa McDonald of TeaHaus and Eat More Tea. First of all, how's it going?

Lisa: Wonderfully. Thank you very much.

Antonio: My first question would be, how did you get into the tea business? like what inspired you?

Lisa: Well, it wasn’t necessarily an inspiration, as much as just a job. I lived overseas for about 15 years. I was a business consultant in France, Germany, and Sweden. Germany is the largest tea-purchasing country, and the only country that does testing on their tea for pesticides and heavy metals is standard practice. I was doing consulting in various industries, I was doing automotive, pharmaceutical, small business, medium business, that type of thing and negotiation, mediation, multicultural, like project team management, consulting, that type of thing.

One of my clients was a tea company, together with the University of Bonn, Germany. They had me help design an international tea sommelier training program. In Europe, it's a four year degree program. By default, I went through the first two years, which are the educational aspects and then the second two years or apprenticeship. In helping them design their training program, I went through the training myself. I am one of a few European-trained tea sommeliers in the US. There's probably less than ten at this point. That is what got me into the industry itself. Though, at that time, I was not planning on opening a tea store or anything. I was doing business consulting. And I also taught at the University of Tübingen, which is Ann Arbor’s Sister City. I taught U.N politics and policies.

But when I moved back to the US, I moved from Germany to Sweden, I taught at the University of Jönköping as well as continued my consulting company. I had my first child and decided to head back to the States. It ended up being Ann Arbor. Once I got here, I decided I didn't want to go into consulting. Traveling from state to state is even further than traveling from country to country in Europe. And I wanted to have more time with my kid. So I contacted the German

connections that I had, and I opened TeaHaus the same week I had my second child back in December of 2007.

Antonio: Wow, that's pretty amazing.

Lisa: That's a really busy week. But he was three days old. All he did was sleep. (Laughs)

Antonio: (Laughs) That's so cool. So you're a business owner of two businesses. Let's talk about the differences between the two because there are these noticeable differences, but they both serve similar purposes, but not really. Talk to me about the differences between TeaHaus and Eat More Tea.

Lisa: Absolutely. So TeaHaus opened in 2007, and when I first opened, we literally just had loose tea. We didn't have any seating. That's not true, we have like three little couches, I called them the waiting couches, you know, when you're waiting for your friend to pick out their tea. And then we had to-go tea, but the core business was loose tea. Then, about three years after that, I had the opportunity to break into the wall where the formal Cake Nouveau location was. Then I opened a kitchen, and we had a restaurant Cafe.

And at some point, I needed more kitchen space and also I launched our DBA or a sister company, called Eat More Tea. The purpose of Eat More Tea is because I make cooking spice blends, I make candies, gelato, tea infused liquors, tea infused tonics, that type of thing with tea.

I wanted a separate branding so that a tea store could carry, for example, and eat more tea spice blends without feeling like they were carrying a competing brand's item. So I separated Eat More Tea from TeaHaus to the extent that I could market Eat More Tea to other tea stores, and again, not being a competing brand for them. And then the Eat More Tea space originally in the front of the multispace was a gelato and candy store with all tea infused platters and candies. But with COVID, it just didn't make sense to staff two locations, and also because it was a gelato store (which is) seasonal. We redesigned the front of Eat More Tea to be our event space.

Lisa (Cont.): In doing the renovations over at TeaHaus during COVID, we lost the ability to just pull a curtain and have private seating to our events. So this way we can be open. At TeaHaus, but at the same time, have a bridal shower, a baby shower, that type of thing. So we're able to have events at the same time as the store being open. So that's kind of what it works out to. I still have the Eat More Tea brand, spice blends, and candy. But we use the Eat More Tea space now mainly for events. During the week, we have various companies renting it for meetings. You can also, as an individual, rent the space, use it, get some scones and some tea and the internet because at the TeaHaus, we don't offer internet and we are completely laptop free environment.

Antonio: Yeah, that was one thing I noticed some came in was no internet, no laptops, just speak with your friends. Be free, be open.

Lisa: Yeah, we have puzzles, we have games, we have cards. We do drawing nights, we do music nights. I feel like especially after COVID, I mean it sounds cheesy, but it's kind of like reconnecting by disconnecting is kind of the concept of the third place. I think with COVID, the concept of the third place became an extension of our work, as opposed to an extension of our home. And I really wanted to bring it back to being that third place being an extension of our home. Not of our work.

Antonio: I love that. Pardon me if I butcher this, but it's a tea sommelier?

Lisa: Yeah.

Antonio: All right, so As a tea sommelier, how do you provide the best product possible at TeaHaus?

Lisa: Testing is very important to me. So again, I get my tea tested in Germany for pesticides, heavy metals, that type of thing. But also I have, in all of the consulting work that I've done, I've had some really great relationships with some of the gardens. Just last week, the the governor of Shiga, which is our sister state in Japan, came and visited. I did consulting work in Japan for some of the small tea gardens. So that cross-promotion is there.

Because I can't travel as often as I would like to the tea gardens, but I have built up those relationships with them, prior to coming back to America. And then also, like I said, Having the teas tested in Germany, I can at least ensure the quality of the product. Also, I've written a book about tea, and I think that just being one of the people people come to in the US for information keeps me on my toes. Being one of the few certified quote experts in America solidifies my spot as someone who knows what she's talking about.

Antonio: One thing that I immediately noticed when I walked in, outside of the no internet policy, was how your space makes people feel when they enter. It's kind of a unique ambiance. Was that purposeful by design? Or when you started the company?

Lisa: Yeah, absolutely. Opening a store with a two-year-old son and a three-day-old son, I mean, literally a three-day-old baby, I wanted TeaHaus to be just an extension of my home. Because I knew that I'm here seven days a week, 16, 17, hours a day. My children literally grew up here. I now have a 15 year old, and a 17 year old. They have spent far more hours in TeaHaus than they ever have in our own home. Starting at age six, they took a public bus directly from their elementary school to TeaHaus. And knowing that going into it and knowing how I am as a person, who will do 110% at something, I wanted to make sure that Tea House was a community. It was important to make sure that the community that surrounds TeaHaus, whether that be through my employees, our community involvement with our free meal program, or a place that families felt comfortable, can bring their kids, we are selling some of the best tea

in the entire world. But I didn't want to come off as snooty. I wanted to be very accessible. I wanted it to be a place where people could feel comfortable while having a high-end product.

A lot of other tea sommeliers wear suits and ties, even tuxedos and white gloves when they're serving the same tea that I'm serving in jeans and a T-shirt with people playing games and doing puzzles. For me the accessibility and the community aspect was just as important as the quality of my product. Mainly because I was raising my kids here.

Antonio: Absolutely. And speaking of the culture part of things, and speaking of accessibility, How do you feel your space has helped contribute to the culture of the Ann Arbor area?

Lisa: We are pretty open minded. I think we're in a very lucky place. But in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor area, I mean people here, because the university is probably, definitely, a little more on the open side of things. But also I think, for me, We've had, for example, transgender meetup nights on a regular basis. We have different community organizations. Whenever the store is closed, if employees want to have meetings of certain types, tea tastings, the transgender meetup, youth for peace, and all these different groups. As long as I trust them, they can have a key. They can use the space. That was really important to me, my space wasn't just for my business, it was for our community.

Also, like when COVID started, literally Also, the week COVID started, we started making 500 free meals a week. That continued for about two and a half years, where we continually made 500 free meals. We went down to about 300 free meals when I reopened, and now I'm still doing whenever I can, free meals to the community. Oh, I started Kindfest about ten years ago. Having lived in Germany for many years, I was on the original committee that started Kindfest. Little things like that. Again, anything that would make this part of town, where I would want to hang out with my kids, was worth me doing. And not just my kids, but just people. (Laughs).

Antonio: That leads to my next question: What about the city that makes you want to live and build here? In your opinion, what makes this town special? The Ann Arbor area in general.

Lisa: I'm originally from Colorado, I grew up in littleton, went to school in Denver, as well as classes in Boulder. I liked the feel of a college town. My husband is a Ukrainian American but grew up mostly in Michigan. So I met him in Europe. He played his cards right, because he brought me to Ann Arbor when we first came to visit. He brought me to the farmers market, he brought me to this area of the Kerrytown area.

I have to be completely honest, if I had not been able to open in Kerrytown, I don't know if I would even have a store. It was not just an arbor, it's like this particular area of Kerrytown. Even though when I opened, there were still lots of empty buildings, it was still not a popular part of town. But that was important to me. I liked the field. I liked being close to the farmer's market. In the home that I lived in, in Germany, my apartment was like 150 years older than our country. I

just liked the old feeling of the city. I like the brick. Ann Arbor has the oldest farmers market in the entire country.

Lisa (Cont.): Things like that drew me to this area, not just to Ann Arbor in general, but just this area. Now that I've been here, I mean having 17 different languages spoken in my kids elementary school was really cool. The library program, the Ypsilanti library, the Ann Arbor libraries, I mean, I took my kids, every single play group and library class there was, I just feel like there's a lot that the area offers. I do sometimes feel that it's a little bit too much of a bubble, and there's a slight level of arrogance here. Which is very frustrating for me as the daughter of janitors. But that's probably why the community, the things that I do for the community are so important to me, just to remind people that not everyone here is a professor or researcher. There are also people who clean their offices. And that's probably what has kept me grounded in his city or a town that has a tendency to sometimes forget that. I'm trying to be politically correct (Laughs).

Antonio: And with that being said, In terms of the community, what are some of your favorite places to visit if you're hanging around?

Lisa: Yeah, I don't get out much. I feel like, When my kids were younger, the Hands-On museum (was) directly across the street, and that was an obvious choice for me. I like walking around downtown, especially having lived in downtown European cities. I like the concept of being able to go and get a cup of coffee or go home and grab something to eat. I like that it's walkable. I do however think that we should not forget that Ann Arbor is in Michigan and Michigan is a car city, and without cars, even in Arbor wouldn't exist.

I think we need to find that balance a little better than we are right now. But I do feel that I like hanging out downtown. My kids would take the public bus down from their school. And just at a very early age, like hanging out downtown. I had parents all the time go "Oh, do you think it's safe?" Like, dude, it's freaking Ann Arbor. Right now one of my favorite restaurants is in Ypsilanti. I think that it's not just downtown Ann Arbor, which offers so much, like any of the areas is definitely offering a lot. And honestly, we were so close to Detroit, which is also really freaking cool. And I think that there's other reasons to go to Detroit than a Red Wings game. I feel like Ann Arbor is well situated, that you can live in the bubble if you choose to. I wish more people would kind of think outside the bubble, because literally, the proximity to a lot of other cool things is what makes Ann Arbor great, not just being Ann Arbor.

Antonio: Absolutely. And I need to ask this. As an expert on tea and all things tea. What are some of your go-to teas and snacks?

Lisa: Of course, everyone always has to ask what's your favorite tea. I mean, I would say having a favorite tea is like having a favorite child; we say we don't. (laughs) No, I'm just joking. I only have two, and they're both great. There are probably three to five teas that I drink most often. One is milky jade oolong tea, and the other is Hōjicha, which is from our sister state in

Japan. I tend to drink more classic teas. Except in the winter, sometimes having a little decaf caramel tea is nice, soothing, and desserty.

There are three to five that are my general rotation. But I'm not going to lie; I have a cup of the C word in the morning. I do drink coffee. I'm an equal-opportunity beverage consumer. But also now with our new space, we have the liquor license. So I have to say, I have my favorite teas. But I also have my favorite teas that I use in other things. So for example, I do not drink Earl Grey. But I use Earl Grey and a lot of my cooking. I use a lot of Earl Grey in the baking. I use a lot of it, for example, Lapsang. I don't drink Lapsang, but it makes one of the best old fashions you'll ever drink in your life. So hard to answer. When you have 230 plus cocktails made with tea, it's a hard question.

Antonio: So is there anything else that you would like people to know? Or that you want to put out there to the world?

Lisa: I think putting out there to the world is that we are just a really awesome place to hang out. We have an amazing cocktail menu, I work with my friend who is from Mammoth distilling, and they are an amazing company. Also my neighbors who are craft beer distributors, M4-CIC are amazing, very locally minded companies as well. We make great cocktails, we have the no laptop policy. I have had two negative reviews about our laptop policy, calling it pretentious or whatever. But I figure I've been here for 15 years. I'm 50 years old, and I don't feel like I have to explain my policy to anyone, and if you don't like it, I'm okay.

It's not from a pretentious standpoint, and it's not from a monetizing standpoint. I think that's what I want to get out there. We didn't take away the laptops, because we didn't want people sitting there all day. You can sit there all day and read a book, you can sit there all day and crochet, you can sit there, but there's just a very different feel from someone who has to turn the page, versus someone who can literally plug in and completely disconnect from their environment. So again, reconnecting by disconnecting and that we are just a really great place for dessert and a cocktail, as well as for our loose tea. I feel like 15 years is a long time but I'm still a baby when it comes to things like some of the businesses in this area, but I think we've done okay so far.

Antonio: Absolutely. And my last question, what's the best way for people to find more about TeaHaus and Eat More Tea?

Lisa: That's a good question because I am absolutely horrible at social media. I have a wonderful staff. In the end, I'm the one who wears all the hats. The best thing to do would be to sign up for our newsletter. I will often forget to post when we have tea classes, or when we do some training, or we do pop ups or when we have, for example, the governor from Shiga visiting us. I'll often forget to post about that, because I'm so busy organizing it, but I have a wonderful woman who helps me do this newsletter and she will make sure it gets in the newsletter. We only send one every couple of weeks. But that's probably the best way to find out what's going

on because it could be that we have an amazing event tomorrow that I just forgot to tell anyone about.

Antonio: Absolutely. And those are all of my questions. Thank you. This has been the Great Minds Think a Lot series with Miss Lisa McDonald, thank you very much.

Lisa: Thank you. It's great meeting you.