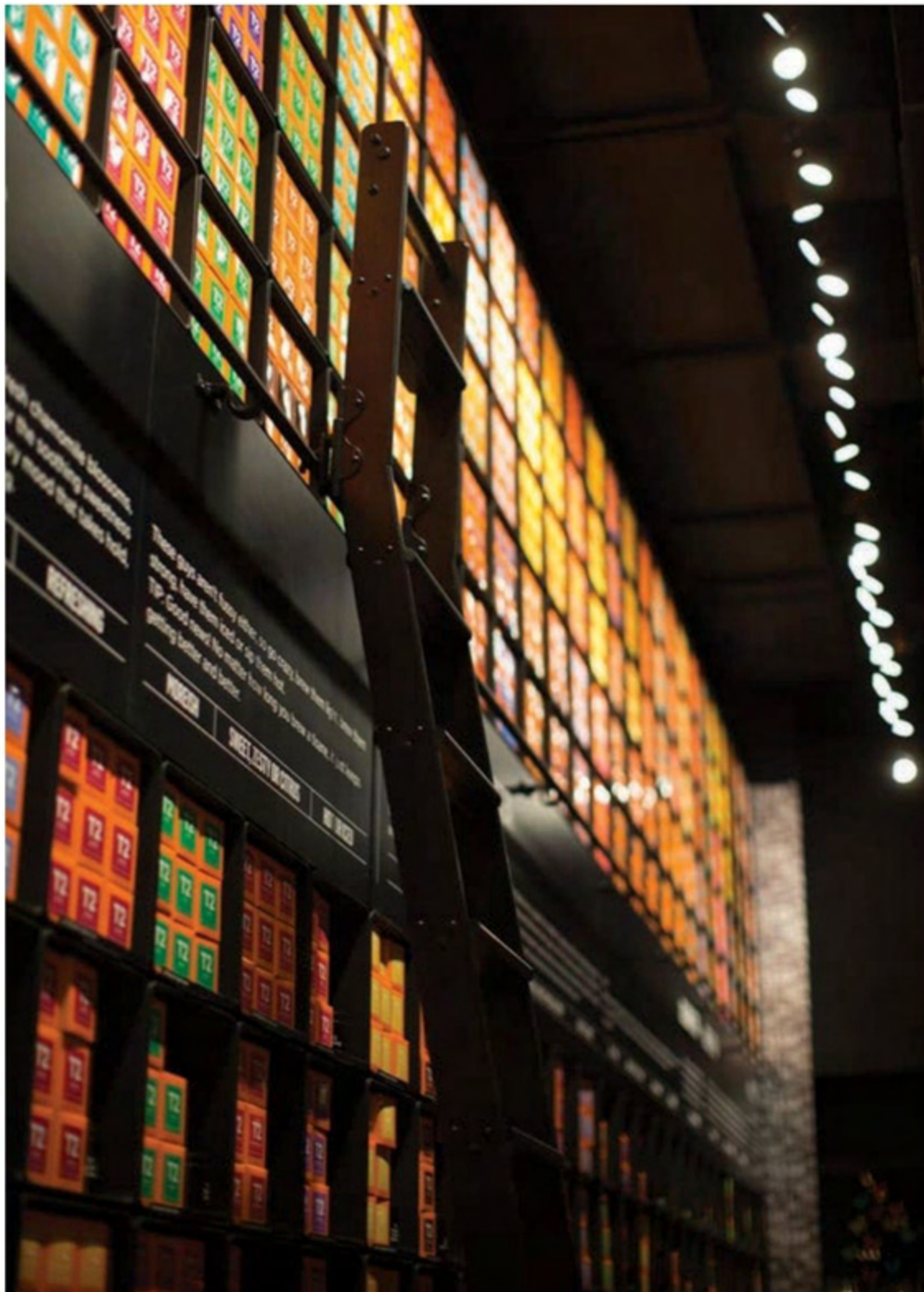


By VILMA BARR
 Photos by PAUL BARBERA
 (unless otherwise noted)

The New Tea Party

Tea is big news again with its own merchandising (*not political*) revolution brewing



If the Sons of Liberty in 1773 were around today, they'd think twice about tossing all that tasty tea into Boston Harbor. Instead, they could haul it off the British ship, set up shop next to Boston Common, and be the colonial version of the success story of today's T2 tea brand.

Melbourne, Australia-based T2, with 50 stores in Australia and New Zealand, has expanded halfway around the world with a retail store in New York's SoHo district, and then bounded across the pond to open in London.

Founded in 1993 by Maryanne Shearer, T2 rejected the hard-edge, library-like atmosphere of most tea shops. In their place, Shearer positioned her tea brand to be "Tea as Theater," to attract a new segment of young tea drinkers in a retail setting that is a catalyst for social interaction. The 1,200-sq.-ft. Shoreditch store is located in a fashionably trendy section of London's East End.

"T2 is hip," states Mark Landini, founder of Landini Associates, the Sydney-based design firm that worked with T2 on the New York and London designs. "Their stores are busy, noisy and social, and the staff makes sure everyone gets served. Consumers have become used to a broad selection of products and services, be it apparel, food or entertainment, so T2 has more than 250 varieties of tea to consider, from sweet to pungent and everything in between."

The tea is displayed on open aroma tables that invite customers to stimulate their senses of taste, touch and smell, and compare the different ingredients and fragrances.

"The staff is personable, knowledgeable and



“It’s an antidote to the dehumanizing

← The staff will brew customers a cup of tea to sample.

Photo by ANDREW MEREDITH

↓ Open shelving displays tea accessories sourced from suppliers around the world.

friendly,” Landini explains. “They will brew the customer a personal cup of tea at a tasting station [and invite] them to sit down at a table and see how they like it.”

Landini identifies T2’s operating style as part of a growing trend not only for people to make something for themselves, but also to share it. “It’s an antidote to the dehumanizing of interaction,” he adds. In addition to the orange-accented packaged teas, a full array of tea-making and tea-serving products, sourced from suppliers around the world, are displayed.

When he first viewed the space on Redchurch Street, it was not inspiring. “There were columns everywhere, and a low ceiling that was barely 8 ft. high,” he describes. To overcome the space challenges, Landini integrated the columns into the floorplan, so as not to hinder traffic flow, and found that the solution for the low ceiling height was to install a wall-to-wall dark mirror. “It makes the store feel bigger, but it isn’t brazen,” he says. “Rather, it reflects the energy being generated below between the staff, the customers and the products.” The firm also designed the lighting, which is functional yet low key, to blend with the intimate ambience that Schearer and Landini felt express the brand’s individuality.

Packages of T2’s extensive tea selection are stacked on layers of shelving created from interwoven, blackened, oxidized steel that extends out onto Redchurch Street and wraps the front of the store. Transparent display units are made from layers of the interwoven steel that expose the inner workings of the drawers.



of interaction.” —MARK LANDINI, LANDINI ASSOCIATES



← Display fixtures and counters in the New York store are similar to those adapted for Shoreditch.

↓ Shelves of storage containers in rainbow hues encourage add-on sales.



For the New York store, walls not supporting product displays are covered with pages from Chinese newspapers. An oversized T2 logo is outlined with small bright bulbs, while display fixtures and counters are similar to those that were adapted for the Shoreditch outpost.

Scheerer was quoted as saying that T2 stores are now selling enough tea to make 9 million cups monthly. Annual volume is estimated at \$57 million. This measure of success did not go unnoticed by consumer products giant Unilever, which acquired T2 in September 2014 for an undisclosed price.

According to Unilever executive Kevin Havelock, T2 has attracted a whole new generation of younger (under 35) tea drinkers. For Unilever, the world's largest tea company with its Lipton and Bushells brands, T2 represents its entry into the super-premium tea market. "I see no long-term limits on the potential for T2," Havelock predicted. 

