



## Frank Cho celebrates 25th anniversary in tea trade

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, as of this July, Frank Cho made his first tea sale — 30 chests of the finest Fukien Jasmine tea to the S.S. Pierce Co. of Boston, which initiated his entry into the U.S. tea trade. In the fall of the same year, Frank became a charter member of the New England Tea Trade Club.

Frank Cho came to New York to work for the Sembodja Corporation of New York in 1951. The Sembodja Corporation was owned by the well known Oei family of Java, and was one of the most active Indonesian tea importers in the early nineteen fifties. This situation changed when Sukarno assumed power.

The last few shipments of China teas were brought in by the Sembodja Corporation until they were banned after the Korean War. Frank worked to help develop and expand the Formosa Black Tea trade, prior to which time Oolong was more frequently associated with this source of supply than other kinds of tea. Frank became manager of Sembodja's tea department in 1953.

In 1958, Frank with the president of Sembodja, I. B. Oei, as a partner, formed a new tea business, the Formost Tea

Corporation. A few years thereafter, Oei died of cancer and Frank assumed all the responsibilities; he has been the president of Formost from its founding until now.

Frank's association with the tea trade is hardly coincidental. His family had been associated with tea in China for many generations. His grandmother's family specialized in the best of Jasmine and Lapsang Souchong tea in Fukien. His uncle was the first chairman of the board of the China Tea Company in the late nineteen thirties.

Frank's own tea training, however, was obtained in this country. In this respect, Frank is grateful to three men: Robert Lewis, Ed Payne, and George Friedman. Robert A. Lewis, after his retirement from Standard Brands, was the consultant for the Sembodja Corporation. While Frank learned the art of tea tasting and acquired a general tea knowledge from all three of these men, it is to George Friedman that Frank feels particularly indebted.

Frank has become an expert in his own right, and modest as he is, he is a recognized tea taster himself. He is currently a member of the U. S. Board

of Tea Experts; and he has served many times on the Tea Appeals Board.

Asked what his reflections are about the tea industry at this time, Frank said, "The people in the tea trade, in general, are friendly and decent. I have handled many other lines of products during these years, and I would prefer to stay with tea." His wife Joan once remarked of Frank, "Tea is in his blood."

Of his own place in the tea industry, Frank reflected, "I am glad to say that during these 25 years, I always fulfilled my obligations, big or small, in all the business I have handled; and to date, there has never been a single rejection (by U. S. Tea Examination) among all the importation during my entire career, and I have sold quite a lot of 'price teas'. This is the way it should be; I am not trying to say I am better because of this, rather that, I know my limitations, and I do not want to do that which I have no confidence in being able to deliver."

Frank's philosophical orientation holds true for both his personal and business life. "I am a believer in 'give and take'; there is no 'one way street' in the long run," he affirms.

While a student at the Harvard Business School, during 1947-49, Frank voiced his opposition, in discussion groups, which he still holds, to attributing profit making the sole incentive in our economic system. Profit making, Frank believes, is not, and should not be, the only motivation. "I am glad to hear," Frank says, "that community conscience is gradually replacing or sharing the importance of the self-centered profit motive. I am very pleased to see that the younger generation of this country is quite different in their orientation today."

Frank originally had no plans to settle in the U.S. He had planned to return to China with the best available training in modern management techniques, after successfully completing his M.B.A. from Harvard in 1949. But plans changed, and Frank settled in New York, eventually deciding to obtain American citizenship.

Of this decision Frank said, "It took me quite a few years to make up my mind. Basically, to change root is an emotional decision. Obviously there were many advantages. I also wanted to search for what I could contribute to a new land."

One of Frank's contributions, aside from his activities in the U.S. tea trade, has been his abiding interest in Chinese

art, especially painting and calligraphy. He founded the Mi Chou Gallery in 1954, the first and only one to exhibit Chinese paintings in New York, and served as its president until 1959; then its vice president from 1959 through 1968.

An amateur painter and calligrapher himself, Frank has studied several years with the renowned master and collector of Chinese painting, C. C. Wang. During his years with the art gallery, Frank was able to accumulate a fine collection of his own.

Frank is also a founding member of the Chinese Opera Club formed in New York in 1951. He plays the Hu-chin, a fiddle comparable to the violin.

Born in Peking, Frank came to the U.S. in 1947. He has served four years on the Junior Board (now the Associate Board), and was believed to be the first Oriental to serve in the U.S. Tea Association. In 1960 he married Joan J. H. Hsu from Shanghai. They have two children, a boy and a girl.

In the offices of Formost Tea, located on Broadway in Manhattan, a sign hangs across the door in the hallway: the Grace Tea Co., Ltd. Frank eagerly explained this seeming incongruity, "A little over ten years ago, Dick Stern walked into my office and asked me, 'are you Frank Cho? I'm Dick Stern; I've talked to two other importers who both referred me to you. I am an advertising man, and I love good tea. I'd like to market a line of gourmet tea, the very best quality money can buy, through the mail. I think the market is ready for it. Frank, can you supply the tea?'"

It was thus that Frank became the sole supplier of Grace Tea. Four years later, as the company did not expand at the rate anticipated by Stern, he sold Grace Tea to Formost. "It's our baby now," says Frank.

Grace Tea features a line of specialty teas under the motto, 'The Finest Teas the World Affords'. In addition to its several thousand mail order customers, Grace Tea also distributes through a very limited number of top stores, including Bloomingdale's, Alfred Dunhill of London, Inc., and Neiman-Marcus, among a few. Frank selects all the teas and does the blending.

Thus, twenty-five years and many tea chests later, Frank is still as enthusiastic and active in the tea trade. A man who loves his work and has continued much to building a strong U.S. tea trade, Frank deserves a toast on his 25th anniversary. ☞