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Benchmarks By Jim Dunn

A Southern Sensation

Some say that the quintessential Southern beverage is a mint julep, but that's nonsense, misguided public perception from "Gone with the Wind" and other clueless culture sources. Your average Southerner is as likely to encounter a mint julep as he is Bigfoot. The Southern beverage is sweet tea. (Of course, to a true Southerner, the term "sweet tea" is redundant. Unsweet tea is liquid kudzu, an unwelcome interloper fouling up the culinary landscape.) And nowhere will you find a better version of that beverage than at Milo's Tea Co. in Bessemer, which can twist the lids shut on 70,000 gallons of liquid bliss a day.

Milo's tea began at Milo's Hamburger Shop on 31st Street and 12th Avenue North in Birmingham. The shop, which was started by Milo Carlton after he returned from World War II, practiced giving customers more than they asked for. Hamburgers came with an extra piece of beef on top of the central patty and a healthy dollop of special sauce, and



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fries got seasoning above and beyond salt. And then there was the tea, which, as Milo's Tea Vice President Jay Evers explains, "Everybody went nuts over."

Despite rumors of molasses or brown sugar being involved, there's no special ingredient to Milo's Tea. It's just the right combination of water, tea and sugar developed years ago by Carlton. Evers says, "Milo's philosophy was to tinker with things, and he let his customers tell him when it was perfect.

He experimented with his tea, he experimented with his sauce, and he was smart in that he didn't tell people how it was going to be—he let them tell him how they wanted it."

Evers can tell tales of Milo's fans indulging their addiction no matter where their location. "There's an Alabama boy getting married in Montana this summer. His in-laws asked him what he wanted for

the reception, and he said, 'I don't care what you do, I just want Milo's there.' We're going to give them the tea, but just the freight on the deal overnight is going to cost them \$500 bucks."

Today, Milo's Tea Co. is a separate entity from Milo's Hamburgers, which operates 15 franchised locations from Birmingham to Montgomery. Milo's son Ronnie Carlton and Ronnie's wife, Sheila, are the reasons franchises and Milo's Tea exist. Carlton convinced his father to franchise the Milo's approach, and the first franchise location opened in 1983 in Birmingham. In 1989, the Carltons hatched the idea of spinning off a tea company, an idea that initially was met with more than a little skepticism. "Of course, people looked at them like they'd lost their minds. Now they're selling bottled water, but at the time, to even think of anybody buying tea was unheard of."

Unheard of but full of potential, as it turned out. The Carltons' operation had a humble start. "They started making it by hand in buckets, hand-filtered, with wooden spoons."

Soon, tea connoisseurs who had grown to love Milo's tea with Milo's hamburgers discovered that Milo's tea with pretty much anything was a good combination. Arrangements with dairies like Barber's and LuVel's allow Milo's to satisfy the cravings of tea lovers all over Alabama, and the company has made inroads into west Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky. All because an Alabama soldier learned to cook in the Army.