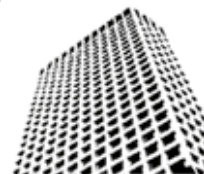


CORPORATE SPOTLIGHT
Company press releases
posted weekly



Welcome **Paul**
[My Account](#)
[Sign Out](#)

[Back to Home](#) >

Wednesday, Oct 06, 2004

Business

[email this](#) [print this](#)

Posted on Tue, Oct. 05, 2004

Entrepreneur sees green with tea business

By Dan Laidman
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

LIVERMORE -
Somewhere in North Carolina, someone is ordering tea that has been harvested by a family in the Aso region of Japan.

In the middle of this transcontinental transaction sits Paul Kotta, clicking away on his home computer in a room surrounded by posters of Star Trek, Bruce Lee and Bob Marley.

Find all the ads,
coupons and discounts
from today's (or last week's)
newspaper online.

Click before you shop.

ContraCostaTimes.com

IMAGES



Mellow Monk green tea is a home-based business operated by husband-and-wife team Paul and Akimi Kotta in Livermore. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Contra Costa Times)

Weather

56° Hi 82 Lo 55
Clear

[Complete forecast](#)

[Check traffic](#)

[Featured](#)

[State & Local Elections](#)

[Presidential race](#)

[Sections](#)

[News](#)

[Breaking News](#)

[Sports](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[TimeOut](#)

[Business](#)

• [PeopleSoft](#)

• [Money](#)

[Matters](#)

• [East Bay Biz](#)

[Buzz](#)

• [Executive pay '03](#)

• [Bay Area](#)

[Bulls & Bears](#)

• [Bay Area Top](#)

[100](#)

• [St. Mary's](#)

**College East
Bay Outlook**
• **Personal
Technology
Obituaries
Opinion
Columnists
Arts &
Entertainment
Home & Garden
Health
Food
Money Matters
Perspective
Travel
Auto Plus
Real Estate
CareerBuilder**
**Expanded
Coverage**
**Presidential
race
Gov.
Schwarzenegger
Uncivil
Servants
Laci Peterson
Iraq
Where we live
More special
reports**
Other Editions
**San Ramon
Valley Times
Valley Times
West County
Times
Brentwood
News
Concord
Transcript**

"A lot of our orders, surprisingly, are from people in the south," Kotta said as he typed away at his computer. "Maybe people in the south are more used to drinking tea than we are."

Kotta has turned a lifelong passion for Japanese culture into a home-based business venture, selling green tea on a Web site called Mellow Monk. Kotta and his wife, Akimi, buy the tea directly from a family farm in Japan and then present it for sale on a site packed with tea tales and tidbits.

Mellow Monk is one of probably a "couple dozen" such specialty tea sites nationwide that fill different niches, said Joe Simrany, president of the New York-based Tea Association of the United States. He thinks there is room for these tiny ventures to grow.

"Tea is in its infancy in this country," Simrany said. "Especially upscale teas."

Spurred by increased awareness of tea's health benefits, the industry has grown domestically from \$1.8 billion in 1990 to more than \$5 billion at the end of last year, Simrany said.

"What the Internet does is it brings these specialty tea products to anyone who wants them," he said.

Kotta likes that his Web site is reaching the tea-deprived hinterlands, and the site includes tips on brewing for



Paul Kotta, who co-owns Mellow Monk, makes a mailing label for a North Carolina customer in Livermore on Wednesday. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Contra Costa Times)

**Sun
Ledger
Dispatch
The Record
Walnut Creek
Journal
Hills
Newspapers
Alameda
Journal
Berkeley Voice
El Cerrito
Journal
Montclarion
Piedmonter
Find it Fast
Contests
Archives
Sports Scores
Ski & Snow
Reports
Movie Times
Find a
Restaurant
Event
Calendars
Discussion
Boards
Obituaries
Comics &
Games
Ski & Snow
News by e-mail
Services
Search the Site
Site Index
Contact Us
Talk to the
Times
Send a Letter
to the Editor**

beginners.

But he thinks the most important part of his business plan is the unique nature of his focus on the narrow green tea niche.

"We want to focus on people who drink it frequently," he said. "We're not trying to be the Costco of green tea."

Kotta, a 38-year-old Daly City native, began his serious green tea drinking when he studied the Japanese language in college. He met his wife while studying abroad and later lived in Japan for 10 years, working as a translator. Eventually the family moved to the East Bay, where Kotta now works as a technical editor and writer at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

About a year and a half ago, Kotta completed a business degree through the University of Phoenix, and his thesis became the Mellow Monk business plan. He spent several thousand dollars to get the business up and running, with the primary expense being the purchase of the domain name www.mellowmonk.com for \$1,800.

At first he feared that processing orders and keeping the Web site updated would be daunting, but like a growing number of e-commerce entrepreneurs he has utilized services like PayPal that handle part of each transaction. To keep the home page fresh he regularly updates a blog with information on tea and Japanese culture.

Mellow Monk's tea comes from the Negata Tea Plantation, a family-owned operation in the Aso region of Japan. The tea draws high marks from Fumio Nakayama, proprietor of the Nakayama Japanese food store in Pleasanton that is the one location outside of

- [FAQ](#)
- [Place an ad](#)
- [Advertise with Us](#)
- [Newspaper Subscription](#)
- [Shopping](#)
- [Grocery coupons](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Cars](#)
- [Homes](#)
- [Apartments](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Newspaper Ads](#)
- [Yellow Pages](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
- [Danville Life](#)
- [Home & Design](#)
- [More Sections](#)
- [Win Harvest Festival tickets!](#)

In conjunction with the 19th Annual Halloween Celebration, Todos Santos Plaza Downtown Concord. Two chances to win fabulous prizes form Downtown Concord Merchants.

- [Click for more info](#)

cyberspace where customers can find Mellow Monk's signature product.

"It's excellent tea," he said, adding that a customer recently told him he now drinks it each morning instead of coffee.

Kotta buys tea from the Negata farm in bulk. He and his wife paste shipping labels on the vacuum-sealed packages, which sell for \$9.75 each and make 40 to 50 cups of tea, then drop them in the mail. Mellow Monk processed about 50 orders in September, Kotta said, up from about 40 the previous month.

Kotta says he is "barely" breaking even right now, though he is laying the foundation for a repeat customer base. Eventually he hopes to add more teas and perhaps some Japanese foods to the site.

One day, he would like Mellow Monk to move into an office, although at the moment, the home headquarters has its advantages, as Kotta pointed out to a visitor last week.

He showed off a map of the United States by the computer where he, his wife, and their two children, ages 6 and 12, stick pins each time a new order comes in.

Kotta said, "It's an interesting geography lesson for the kids."

Dan Laidman covers small businesses and professional-services firms. Reach him at 925-943-8263 or dlaidman@cctimes.com.

PROFILE

- COMPANY: Mellow Monk
- WEB SITE: www.mellowmonk.com
- E-MAIL: info@mellowmonk.com

 [email this](#)  [print this](#)

Ads by Google

[Team Mount Diablo Realty](#)

Contra Costa Real Estate Serving Concord,
Clayton and beyond

www.teammountdiablorealty.com

[Diablo Valley Real Estate](#)

Sell/buy homes in Contra Costa, CA MLS
Search, Area Specialist, Relo



Click here
to visit other
Real Cities sites

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [TimeOut](#) | [Business](#) | [Shop Local](#) | [Classifieds](#) |
[Jobs](#) | [Cars](#) | [Homes](#)

[About The Contra Costa Times](#) | [About the Real Cities Network](#) |
[Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [About Knight Ridder](#) |
[Copyright](#)