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LIFE

Light of Day Organics: Visiting Michigan's only tea farm

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Traverse City may be known for its wineries, but people might be surprised to learn that it is also home to Michigan's only tea farm. Light of Day Organics has been growing the tropical plant since 2004, providing delicious drinks and a relaxing atmosphere to visitors from all over the world.

"There are plenty of beverage options we have, but the reason we're drinking tea, this extremely human, heavy labor of love to drink, is that you come into the sacred space," said owner Angela Macke.

The 75-acre farm, located off of M-72 between downtown Traverse City and the Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes, offers a small tea shop as well as a picturesque garden where visitors can sip their drinks and take a self-guided tour of the property.

The experience is incredibly peaceful, like walking into a yoga or meditation retreat, which is part of Macke's overall wellness goal. When entering the garden, guests do not directly see the tea plants. Instead, they are surrounded by rows of fruit, vegetables, flowers, and herbs – like berries, apples, cherries, lavender, chamomile and more – all grown to be mixed into Light of Day's more than 62 teas and tisanes ("teas" that don't contain the actual tea plant).

At the center is the Meditation Garden, designed in the eight-sided style of a Japanese Bagua. A gazebo rests in the middle, while a firepit off to the side provides numerous opportunities for visitors to sit and relax, enjoying the chirping of the birds and catching glimpses of the chipmunks and rabbits passing through.

"The whole goal is to ground yourself and come into alignment with yourself," she said. "It's to have this special, set-aside time for you and the divine to reconnect."

The tea bushes are located toward the back within hoop houses, which are temperature-controlled structures to allow for the hot weather plants to thrive in northern Michigan.

Hoop houses are similar to green houses, except plants grow directly into the soil instead of resting on cement, Macke said. The three 19-foot by 30-foot hoop houses – with varying lengths between 96 and 100 feet - are covered in layers of plastic. Each layer increases the environment's USDA Plant Hardiness Zone, which determines which plants are most likely to thrive at a location. Zones range from 1 to 13, with one at the North Pole and 13 at the equator. Located smack in the middle on the 45th parallel, Traverse City ranges from zones 4 to 6 , though the tea plants thrive in zones 7 to 8.

“By me putting plastic on the outsides, creating a hoop house, and then putting in an inner hoop, I've essentially tricked the plants into thinking they live in North or South Carolina,” Macke said.

Ironically, Michigan's heavy snowfall also helps to keep the plants warm by creating an igloo effect with an additional layer of insulation. Macke said the system is so effective that she doesn't need to use heaters at all in the winter, only fans to control the temperature.

“Freezing has not been the problem,” she said. “It's keeping them cool.”

In addition to being the only tea farm in Michigan and one of the few tea farms in the United States, Macke said Light of Day is also the only certified organic and Demeter Biodynamic tea farm in North America.

The Demeter Biodynamic distinction is particularly notable, because it is considered the highest certification of commercially grown food in the world, Macke said. The designation means the farm is self-sustaining, producing things like its own seeds, its own fertilizer and its own mulch, and keeps the farm from getting contaminated from off-site sources. Part of the certification is leaving 10% of the land wild, though Light of Day is 20%.

“You kind of make a commitment to all the living beings here,” Macke said. “You're like, ‘Ok, I'm not going to mow here, snakes go there, beneficial insects go there. Chipmunks, make your home. Birds, build your nests. I'm not going to mess with you.’”

Macke had never intended to become a tea-grower.

Prior to the farm, she was a nurse working in an emergency room open heart unit with a passion for wellness. Her interest in holistic health started when she was in college, frustrated from suffering from Crohn's disease, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. After college, she moved to Maui and did extensive training in creative nutrition and holistic health, where she learned the benefits of tea.

“I just learned how to heal my own body,” she said.

Wanting to share that knowledge, she planned to import and mix her own teas while teaching people about nutrition but couldn't find the quality of ingredients she was looking for. Despite ordering “organic” products, she was noticing a bad aftertaste to her teas. She sent them for testing at Cornell University, the University of Michigan and the University of Nebraska, where she learned they were loaded with pesticide residue and decided to take matters into her own hands.

“I guess you have to grow your own ingredients if you want it to be what I wanted this to be,” she said.

While she imports black tea, her white, green and oolong teas – as well as most of the plants they're mixed with – are completely grown on the farm. The different types of tea all come from the same *Camellia sinensis* plant but vary on the level of oxidation.

According to Macke, tea is the most labor-intensive crop known to man, and it is more efficient to import black tea from India where processing can be done on machines. Instead, Light of Day specializes in white tea, which, by definition, must contain the tea bud, and requires minimal processing.

“The biggest value add we can do for our tea grown here in Michigan, is to produce white,” she said. “Black tea's a dime a dozen, white tea is so much more valuable. To have Michigan-grown certified white tea is pretty special.”

Despite its specialization in white tea, the farm's most famous tea is its Creamy Earl Grey, a black tea which Macke said has won a lot of awards, including the best creamy Earl Grey in the world at the World Tea Expo.

“It's really unique, because it doesn't have traditional oil of Bergamot,” she said. “It's a homemade oil with lots of triple strength vanilla in there and calendula petals, which make it really emollient and creamy.”

Other popular offerings include its Leelanau Licorice – a tisane made of licorice root and peppermint – and its matcha tea.

Like the rest of the world, Light of Day suffered from the pandemic, losing 90 percent of its sales when it closed its doors in March of 2020 and transitioned to online only. Before, visiting the farm was more than shopping for tea, it was an experience. A checklist greeted

visitors when they entered the tea shop, encouraging them to see a live tea plant, smell the teas, sample a flight of teas and learn about upcoming tea wellness classes.

“They’d come in and they want to put their whole nose in the tin to smell it to help decide which flavor to buy. There’s just no way to do any of that with a mask on,” Macke said. “We just thought, from an infectious disease standpoint, it was the worst possible scenario.”

While the farm opened back up this summer, it is currently limited to outdoor-only. Visitors can purchase a cup of one of two daily offerings or tins of any of its teas or tisanes from a pop-up van located in front of the store. For \$10, visitors can take a self-guided tour of the farm.

“What I didn’t want to do was re-open and have to close again,” Macke said. “We just don’t want to have everybody touching everything again.”

Another option for visitors is to take part in the farm’s new “Taste and Tour” tea classes, which occur every other Friday morning. For \$125, participants will learn the basics of tea – including the different types, a short history and preparation instructions – as well as enjoy an expansive tea tasting. They will also get a private tour of the farm and learn the process of tea-making, including harvesting their own botanicals.

Macke said the course is based in overall wellness, opening with grounding exercises and meditation and understanding the health benefits of tea.

“We’re going to get you tea-drunk on matcha, and then I take them through white tea, green tea, oolong tea, black tea, tisanes, and taste several,” she said. “Then I go through a head-to-toe summary of all the proven and speculative benefits from drinking tea, from an RN, nutritionist perspective.”

The course takes place in the farm’s yurt classroom and runs between 2.5-3 hours long. Classes are capped at 21 people at a time and filled up quickly. Private consultations and tours are also available.

Macke is planning on continuing the tea classes for the rest of the summer, though she is still deciding what the immediate future of the shop will look like. When the weather cools, she said she’ll likely move the pop-up shop indoors in an apothecary style, where customers can also come and get their tins refilled, though she may still allow visitors to purchase cups of tea. She would like to take advantage of the shop’s commercial kitchen if there’s a way to keep people from touching or smelling everything during the pandemic.

She'd also like to open the farm to events. In the past, Light of Day has hosted yoga and tai chi classes, as well as small vow renewals and receptions. She'd like to continue this and expand to things like weddings, tea parties and graduation parties, or partner with a local restaurant to provide an outdoor dining venue. She is looking to hire an event coordinator to manage them.

Whatever the future holds for Light of Day, Macke isn't worried.

"We've always been open year-round in some capacity, we'll figure it out," she said. "I'm optimistic."