

Jakarta heritage coffee: A tale of two shops

Warung Tinggi

Yenni Kwok in Jakarta



Tucked away in a small alley off Jl. Hayam Wuruk in Chinatown is a well-kept Jakarta secret – Warung Tinggi coffee shop.

It boasts that it is Indonesia's oldest coffee company, with a history going back over 125 years. "Our coffee has come a long way, since the Dutch era, and the knowledge and expertise about coffee has been passed on from one generation to another," says Rudy Widjaja, the fourth-generation owner of Warung Tinggi.

In this modest, no-frills shop-house, you can buy coffee beans, have them ground, and also sample a cup of freshly brewed coffee of your choice.

The family-run business prides itself at selling its own unique blends of the archipelago's best coffees, from Java, Bali, Toraja, Sumatra's Mandailing, Lampung, East Timor and even West Papua.

Warung Tinggi started in 1878, when Rudy's great-grandfather, Liauw Tek Soen, a Hakka migrant from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, and his wife, an indigenous pribumi woman, opened a warung, a small eatery, on Jl Hayam Wuruk, not far from where the shop is now.

The locals called Liauw's shop Warung Tinggi (the high warung), because it was located on higher ground than the surrounding area. Legend has it that the coffee of Warung Tinggi was more popular than its own dishes.

Liauw was a tailor by training, but he proved to have a talent in preparing coffee. He bought the raw materials from women foot-peddlers, who carried the coffee beans in a bamboo-woven basket on their head (and, whose image later became the logo of Warung Tinggi). Liauw roasted the beans on a big wok, sifted and ground them.

In 1927, the eldest of Liauw's three sons, Liauw Sim Yao, started to run the business and expanded the coffee operation. He designed and built a coffee-roasting machine to roast the coffee better. In honor of his father, Sim Yao named the business Tek Soen Hoo Eerste Weltevredensche Koffiebranderij, which roughly translates as Tek Soen's Shop, the First Coffee Roasting Company in Weltevreden (today's Kota).

Liauw Sim Yao's first son, Liauw Tian Djie, later known as Udjan Widjaja, inherited the company in 1948. At that time, Warung Tinggi sold only one kind of coffee, packed in simple brown paper.

“In the 1950s and 1960s, my father started to make more coffee blends,” Rudy Widjaja, 64, said about Udjan. “Many of our customers were coffee addicts. The business kept growing, although we did not advertise our products. New customers came by word of mouth.”

The names of the shop and the family were changed in 1967 after Soeharto's New Order regime discouraged the use of Chinese names. Tek Soen Hoo became Warung Tinggi. After consulting the Javanese primbon (divination manuals), the Liauws became the Widjajas.

After Udjan died in 1978, four of his 11 children – Rudy, Darmawan, Suyanto and Yanti – ran Warung Tinggi. Rudy was in charge of administration and marketing, Dharmawan of production and purchasing raw materials, Suyanto of production and sales, and Yanti was responsible for accounting and finance.

In the mid-1990s, the Widjajas decided to split the family's heirloom. One son got the shop building on Jl Hayam Wuruk, Rudy procured the name and business rights of Warung Tinggi, while the rest shared the money inheritance. The shop was moved to its current location on Jl Tangki Sekolah while the factory was relocated to Daan Mogot.

During the May riots in 1998, his factory and house in Daan Mogot was looted. Rudy Widjaja and his family fled to Singapore and stayed there for one-and-a-half years. “I brought the important documents only, arrived in Singapore wearing a pair of flip-flops. I was traumatized, but I

decided to come back later because what could I do in Singapore? My life was in Indonesia,” he said.

After his return, he moved the factory to Tangerang. However, another tragedy struck some years later. In 2002, His son, Ferry, whom he had groomed as his successor, died in an accident. It hit him very hard but he also bounced back, eventually.

He is currently training his youngest daughter, Angelica, 25, in coffee production. “She isn't quite there yet, but I told her, ‘It doesn't matter. It took your brother some years to learn the ropes.’”

“Indonesian coffee is among the best in the world, although in quantity, it lags behind the three largest producers, Brazil, Colombia and Vietnam,” said Rudy.

“Coffee is planted and produced all across Indonesia, but the quality and taste vary, depending on the climate, the soil and the care. Toraja coffee, I would say, is number one. But, in Warung Tinggi, we blend different coffee beans from various parts of Indonesia to get the best mix.”

Warung Tinggi coffee provides eight types of coffee blends, from robusta, to arabica, from ‘male’ and ‘female’ beans to ‘excellence’, with prices ranging from Rp 12,500 to Rp 87,500 per 250 grams.

For generations, Warung Tinggi has been a quintessentially family-run business that has stayed put in its Chinatown locale. But in this era of globalization, where franchise cafes are proliferating, it is looking to expand its business, opening cafes, albeit likely to start outside Jakarta, and producing flavored coffee.

Rudy does not see any competition with the other branch of the Widjaja family, his nephew and niece, who recently opened Bakoel Koffie cafes. “The most important thing is to maintain the high quality of our blends,” he said. “That has been the recipe for our survival over all these years.”

Warung Tinggi, Jl Tangki Sekolah No. 26 (off Jl Hayam Wuruk), Jakarta 11170. Tel 6256843, 6256875



Bakoel Koffie

Syenny Widjaja, of Bakoel Koffie, has a vivid memory of her childhood, playing hide-and-seek among the sacks of coffee beans and breathing the scent of roasted coffee all day long.

“The smell of coffee was so persistent. No matter how often we took a shower or washed our hair, we quickly smelled of coffee again,” she said.

Syenny, 37, and her brother, Hendra, grew up in Warung Tinggi, Indonesia's oldest coffee company, which was founded in 1878, and has been synonymous with the Widjaja family.

Their father, Darmawan, who passed away last year, run Warung Tinggi with his three siblings for more than 15 years until he retired in 1994.

“He and his elder brother, Suyanto, were the two main roasting experts of Warung Tinggi,” Syenny said. “They learned the skills from their father, an expertise that is handed down from generation to generation.”

Wishing to “continue and preserve our family heritage”, Syenny and Hendra, 36, set up in 2000 Bakoel Koffie – literally means ‘coffee basket’, selling not only cups of freshly brewed coffee but also freshly roasted coffee beans.

The siblings combined their skills and experience. Syenny has taken charge of the marketing side of Bakoel Koffie, making use of her previous experience working as a marketing consultant for multinational companies Unilever and Coca-Cola. Meanwhile, having been trained by his father in the art of manufacturing coffee since 1986, Hendra oversees the production side.

The pride of their family heritage is reflected by their choice of logo for Bakoel Koffie. It shows a sarong-clad woman carrying a bamboo basket on her head – slightly different yet somewhat similar to the logo of

Warung Tinggi, currently run by their uncle, Rudy Widjaja. Vintage photographs of Tek Soen Hoo, the old name of Warung Tinggi, are also prominently displayed in their cafes.

Syenny insists Bakoel Koffie is more true to the old traditions. "We learnt the skills from our father who knew the traditional coffee-making technique of Tek Soen Hoo. "Moreover, we target a different market. We don't sell mass-produced stuff, we sell our coffee as an upmarket product."

Bakoel Koffie's six cafes in Jakarta indeed reflect the high-end market they are aiming at. The interior is smartly and cozily designed, and its vintage-style dark wood furniture provides a "tempo doeloe" old-time nostalgic ambience.

"We want to have an atmosphere, mood and identity that are uniquely Indonesian," said Judith Cook, a British public-relations consultant who joined Bakoel Koffie as a business partner in 2001.

Syenny admitted that the Starbucks franchise has generated a coffee culture worldwide and heightened an appreciation for coffee. "People here tend to drink the three-in-one coffee mix, while good Indonesian coffee is exported," she said. "But it is changing. And, we are offering the finest of Indonesia's coffee products."

Bakoel Koffie boasts to source the highest-quality coffee beans from Sumatra, Sulawesi and Java. It offers three blends, priced at Rp 35,000 (plus 10 percent tax) for every 250 grams.

It also stamps the roasting date on the package to assure the freshness of their coffee. "Coffee connoisseurs usually want to know when the coffee is roasted," Syenny said.

As a rule of thumb, well-packed coffee beans have a six-month shelf life, but they do not sell beans even one month after roasting. "It adds more complications to our business, but we care for the quality," Syenny said.

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