



## The real tea party

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Cindi Bigelow

If Cindi Bigelow were a kind of tea, she'd be the perfect blend of strong and soothing flavors.

As the president of the Fairfield-based company that bears her family's name – one that has made the specialty tea as American a product as Pepsi – Cindi would be the first to tell you that she is an exacting boss. Woe to those Bigelow team members who come to the decision-making process unprepared.

"The team has to come in with its A-game," she says matter-of-factly.

She has a directness and warmth that strike you the moment she takes your hand and looks you in the eye. The more than passing resemblance to Caroline Kennedy – honeyed hair, clear-cut features – enhances the

impression. So does the casual elegance of her attire – pink floral-print jacket, creamy-yellow slacks and blouse and gold-hued, pointy Prada slip-ons. Meeting Cindi Bigelow is like watching the sun break over a hill.

Yet, during the photo shoot for this story, her radiance takes on a softer focus as she bonds with photographer David Bravo's 6-year-old, helping him pour loose tea into yellow and green bowls. This is more than a display of parenting skills honed as the proud, devoted mother of a college student and another who is college-bound with an A + average. It is an illustration of a savvy leader who understands that people, like Bigelow teas, come in many varieties. The smart manager is multifaceted enough to adjust accordingly.

"You have to match your skills to each individual."

This is a particularly important lesson in a challenging economy, she says, in which women have become the primary breadwinners and are moving up in the management ranks.

"There are wonderful opportunities for women today. But I always ask women to be more reflective. ...You have to work on yourself."

This attitude – optimistic and other-directed – has no doubt helped make Bigelow the No. 1 producer of specialty teas in America, with yearly sales of \$140 million. That represents more than 1.5 billion tea bags annually, of everything from Pomegranate Pizzazz to White Chocolate Kisses. The most popular of Bigelow's approximately 120 brands? Green Tea. "We can't make enough," says Ed Hill, maintenance and facilities manager.

Statistics are only one indication of Bigelow's success. As she strides quickly and purposefully ahead of you through the 107,000-square-foot plant, redolent with mint, citrus and other herbs and fruits, she reflects the warm greetings she receives from employees, like the group of women in hairnets who are about to go on a break.

Maybe that's why when asked how many employees she has, she says, "We have 330 families," at three manufacturing facilities. The other two are in Boise and Louisville, although the Fairfield headquarters is the only plant that blends the teas.

Among the company's families is that of Al and Kathleen Pangrac. The chatty Al – who along with Ed Hill takes the reporter on a tour of the immaculate, high-security plant – is the blending manager. He met wife Kathleen, who's in consumer services, at the company.



Cindi Bigelow

Bigelow, then, is both a family company and the company of one particular American family. Its story began in 1945 with Cindi's paternal grandmother, Ruth Campbell Bigelow, an interior designer looking to get into the food business as the demand for decorating services declined during the Depression. After her and husband David Sr.'s experiments with Chinese seasoning and forays into the tapioca market, Ruth turned her attention to her first love, tea.

"She did not feel that in our country, there was a variety of tea," Cindi says. "There was just plain black tea."

Ruth would remedy this with a Southern colonial-inspired blend of fine tea flavored with orange peel and sweet spice that she called Constant Comment, for the buzz the piquant brew caused among friends and acquaintances.

Ruth is everywhere at that Fairfield plant, from the name on the building, R.C. Bigelow; to the framed black-and-white photos of her with her son, David C., and daughter-in-law, Eunice, Cindi's parents, who ran the company for 50 years and are now co-chairs; to the autographed copies of David C.'s "My Mother Loved Tea" that adorn employees' desks; to the antiques from her New Hampshire farm that now grace the hallways. As Cindi passes by one, she touches it lovingly. It's the cast-iron fireplace by which her father studied as a child.

But perhaps Ruth is nowhere more apparent than in the entrepreneurial spirit of her granddaughter, who has spearheaded the company's green-building initiatives and latest products, including Black Tea with

Pomegranate, Decaffeinated Green Tea with Pomegranate and Decaffeinated Green Tea with Wild Blueberry & Acai.

She also founded the Annual Bigelow Tea Community Challenge, a 5-kilometer road race, walk and kids' fun run that has to date raised \$600,000, all for local charities.

Clearly, she is no rich girl who waltzed in to be handed the keys of the kingdom. Though Cindi says she had always wanted to run the company – as an 8-year-old she would plead with her father to let her do it – she served a long apprenticeship. After graduating magna cum laude from Boston College with a bachelor's degree in sales and marketing and earning an MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, she did a stint at the Seagram Co. before joining Bigelow full-time in 1986. There she wound her way through finance, customer service, materials planning, operations and sales and marketing before becoming company president in 2005.

"My father knew what he was doing," she says of his bringing her along slowly. "I learned the building blocks of the organization."

She also put in the hours, often working until 9 or 10 p.m. It helps, she says, to work with people like Jenned Serrano, her executive assistant and community relations coordinator, who sits outside her sunny corner office and with whom she communicates in an intuitive staccato shorthand.

But ultimately it comes back to the woman herself, who always seems to be one step ahead of you literally and figuratively. How does she manage it all – the company, the husband who has his own business, the kids, the extracurricular projects?

"I do have good capacity for excess information. I've always been comfortable with a lot of balls in the air."

Then she's off to another meeting, leading the way as usual.

"God gave me a lot of energy, that's all I can tell ya."

### **American teatime**

When you think of tea – which dates from 2700 B.C. China and then spread to Japan circa A.D. 600 – you don't automatically think of the United States. The only tea plantation in North America is the one in Charleston owned by the Bigelow company that produces its American Classic brand. Nonetheless, we

Americans have made some important contributions to tea, according to David C. Bigelow's "My Mother Loved Tea" – and we're not just talking Boston Tea Party here either.

The first American innovation was the tea bag, a felicitous accident that occurred when a merchant decided to send samples in small gauze bags to customers, who promptly plunked them into their tasting pots.

The second was iced tea, created amid the stifling heat of the St. Louis World's Fair in the summer of 1904.

Today, 85 percent of all tea consumed here is iced.

When it comes to tea, the U.S. remains the only country where ice is twice as nice.

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### **About Georgette Gouveia**

Georgette Gouveia is editor-in-chief of WAG magazine. For 30 years, she held a variety of positions at Gannett newspapers in White Plains, including ultimately that of senior cultural writer for The Journal News before becoming a reporter for the Westchester County Business Journal. She is the author of "The Essential Mary Cassatt" (Wonderland Press/Harry N. Abrams Inc.). When she's not tending WAG, she spends her time writing fiction, singing, practicing yoga and decorating her Westchester home. You can read her musings at [theartsmuse.blogspot.com](http://theartsmuse.blogspot.com).

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