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Chinese herbs catch on big in U.S.

By Eddie Vega

The pharmacists of Kamwo Herbal Pharmacy in New York's Chinatown spend their days weighing and mixing bear gallbladder, deer tail, wild ginger and other traditional Chinese botanical and animal ingredients.

The owner, Tomas Leung, 38, comes from a long line of herbal pharmacists. His great-grandfather had an herbal pharmacy in Hong Kong. Leung's father and grandfather, he says, opened their store in America in 1973. "It is the oldest continuous herbal pharmacy in New York City," he said.

In recent years the demand for raw herbal remedies has put Kamwo at the forefront of a booming business. Importation of Chinese botanicals used in traditional medicines soared to \$132 million in 2006 from \$67 million five years earlier, an increase of 96 percent, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

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The pharmacists of Kamwo Herbal Pharmacy in New York City's China Town spend their days weighing and mixing bear gall bladder, deer tail, wild ginger and other traditional Chinese botanical and animal ingredients. In recent years, the soaring demand for raw herbal remedies and a reputation for quality has made Kamwo an industry leader. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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The explanations for the surge vary. For Leung, the North American Free Trade Agreement passed in 1994 forced him to find new customers who may have then helped create a greater demand for herbs across the country. For years Leung's customers were exclusively Chinese immigrants who worked in the local garment factories. But when NAFTA passed, he said: "The garment factories moved overseas to Mexico and, ironically, to China. The workers found new work in the outer boroughs. We had to forge a new direction and change our business model."

So he began marketing to licensed acupuncturists and Western practitioners of traditional Oriental medicine. As a result, the composition of his customer base flipped. Today almost 95 percent of his clients are non-Chinese and about 85 percent come from outside Chinatown.

But nationally, the foreign-born Chinese population is on the rise, up 87 percent since 1990. This boom may have created a greater demand in the United States for Chinese herbs, said Caroline Yuen, an agricultural trade specialist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, she said, some herbs are becoming easier for consumers to take as they are made into capsules or ready-to-eat supplements.



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It is all part of a global trend, said Dr. Edmund Lee, a Hong Kong-based consultant on the development of biotechnology and Chinese medicine. "Chinese medicine, with 4,000 years' worth of literature on the treatment of illnesses, provides a good opportunity for evidence-based research and development of natural products, dietary supplements, botanicals, and medicines by scientific researchers."

Those researchers have made groundbreaking discoveries; for example, wild ginger and soy have been shown to inhibit cancer. As a result, the Western medical community has become more accepting of herbal remedies, says Mel Drisko, of the University of Colorado's Center for Integrative Medicine in Denver.

"It's not just word of mouth, or media exposure," he said. "We have seen over these last few years a pretty dramatic sea change. Some of the most conservative physicians have seen some of their patients improve from the use of traditional Chinese therapies. These physicians have become some of our best sources for patient referrals."

In San Francisco, Michelle Kuroda's four-year-old Chinese medical practice is a beneficiary of that trend. She has seen a 50 percent spike in the number of new clients, largely because of referrals by Western doctors. Kuroda also treats



Following traditional recipes, a Kamwo pharmacist cooks raw botanicals in state of the art boilers. In recent years, the soaring demand for raw herbal remedies and a reputation for quality has made Kamwo an industry leader. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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patients one day a week at San Francisco's Metropolitan Medical Group, a primary care practice run by Western doctors, in what is becoming a more common arrangement.

Acupuncturist Jon Simon, 39, works closely with Western doctors in New York. "They focus on specific symptoms, and I look at the whole person," he said. "It's best when we work together."

With a thriving practice at two Manhattan locations, Simon goes through bushels of exotic medical herbs like wild ginger, used to clear blocked nasal passages during colds, and bear gallbladder, an animal-based remedy for gastric and neurological troubles.

But concerns about the effects of herbal medicines still linger. Many outlets no longer carry certain raw botanicals or traditional medicines made with animal products because of increased government regulation, Simon said.

Under federal law, many of herbs and herbal formulas may be sold as dietary supplements if all the ingredients have a history of safe use in the food supply, according to the Division of Dietary Supplement Programs of the U.S. Public Health Service. It is not enough for herb suppliers to say the ingredients already exist as an article of food. They must document that history, identify the source of the raw material



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history, identify the source of the raw material, and describe the composition and manufacturing process.

Those regulations help build trust, Simon said. Shopping for traditional products like bear gallbladder, which has been used in China for centuries to treat everything from headaches to parasite infections, requires special care, he said. "Unscrupulous sellers will inject mercury to add weight and jack up the price. To ensure purity, you have to cut open animal products like deer tail." Taken from Sika deer, the tail is used to treat fatigue and impotence.

A medical disaster in Belgium illustrates the concern over improper mixing. One hundred patients who sought weight-loss treatment in a clinic there in the early 1990s came down with renal disease. Seventy of them eventually needed kidney transplants or dialysis, according to the U. S. Food and Drug Administration. Researchers hypothesized that a dangerous herb, Aristolochia Fangchi, which contains a nephrotoxin called aristolochic acid, was mistakenly substituted for the safe herb Stephania tetrandra. The names are very similar in Chinese and may have easily confused an inexperienced practitioner.

But Simon trusts his supplier, Kamwo, based on his personal experience with Leung's expert knowledge and the high quality of his products.

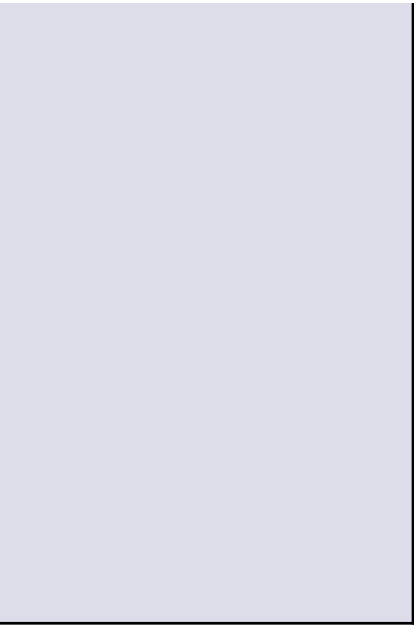
animal ingredients. In recent years, the soaring demand for raw herbal remedies and a reputation for quality has made Kamwo an industry leader. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



Kamwo Greeter Liz Greenhill, 30, offers a customer a whiff of the fresh herbs imported from China. In recent years, the soaring demand for raw herbal remedies and a reputation for quality has made Kamwo an industry leader. (Eddie Vega / CNS)



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Today, Kamwo sells 30,000 tons of herbs each year, grossing \$2.7 million to \$3 million, Leung said. His pharmacists still hand-mix herbs and medicines to specific prescriptions and weigh them in large brass and wood precision scales, the same kind used in Bangkok to weigh gold.

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