

STEEPED IN INNOVATION

Fulbright scholars pitch tea app to Bigelow CEO

BY BRIAN KOONZ
PHOTO AUTUMN DRISCOLL

THE WHISTLE OF THE KETTLE was unmistakable, an invitation to sip some tea and spend some time with your thoughts. Only this siren wasn't shouting from a stovetop—it was coming from a new mobile app created by Fulbright Scholars at the School of Business.

The app, Time 4 Tea, was demonstrated recently for Bigelow Tea, the Connecticut-based specialty tea company. The timer helps consumers brew a perfect cup of tea by matching the ideal steeping time for each blend.

As part of the app's beta testing, Cindi Bigelow, the company's president and chief executive officer, visited the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship for the first time to share her company's story and to steep a cup of Lemon Ginger tea. She cautioned her audience to never, ever squeeze a tea bag when removing it from a cup, as the bitter tannins will ruin the taste.

The Time 4 Tea app was conceived by Tamara Leskovar, a Fulbright Scholar from Slovenia studying archaeology. After sipping yet another cup of bitter tea that had steeped too long, the avid tea drinker decided her palate deserved better. "I always had to remind myself to take the bag out of the water," Leskovar said.

A meeting last October with Laszlo Dinca, an MBA student, Fulbright Scholar from Hungary and the executive assistant at the innovation center, changed her tea drinking habits. "Laszlo was explaining what the center does," Leskovar recalled, "and I said, 'I have an idea but I have no idea how to do anything with it. Would you be willing to listen to me?' He said, 'Yes, of course,' and we started talking."

The conversation led to the creation of the Time 4 Tea app. The digital tea steward works by scanning a tea bag tag's QR code, a crossword puzzle-like design that works

like a bar code. Once a QR code is scanned with a smart phone, the app matches the information to a specific blend of tea. At present, QR codes are not widely printed on tea bag tags in the industry. Tejas Kumar '16, a front-end developer and graphic designer at the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, created the app.

"We still have a lot of work to do," Dinca said, "but we're excited about how far we've come." So is Bigelow, who believes the Time 4 Tea app is promising.

"We have to look at the app and see how we could apply it," Bigelow said. "We don't have a QR code on every one of our tags. We need to find out what it would take to ... just read the foil [packaging]."

For Bigelow, the third generation to work in the tea business, there are striking similarities between her grandmother and these Quinnipiac students. "She liked to 'speriment.' My father says that all the time, and then he chuckles," Bigelow said.

It's precisely this spirit of relentless curiosity that Professor Norman Gray nurtures. "We take the idea and we commercialize it," said Gray, the Carlton Highsmith Chair of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. "We do that by taking the idea, and with the student, putting a team around it that includes all the elements necessary to make it successful. Then we can go to funding and raise money."

Gray said the other option is to find a strategic partner.

Cindi Bigelow, president and CEO of family-owned and Connecticut-based Bigelow Tea, tests the Time 4 Tea app with Ashton Pett '15, MBA '17, at the Quinnipiac Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship.



"This is a project that really can't go to funding, but if we find a partner like Bigelow ... we can make it real. That's the fun part of it."

The hard part of it, as Bigelow knows, is building a company that can feed a dream and grow it. "I'm an irritant," Bigelow said. "I drive, I drive, I push. I never compromise, and I challenge you. But I also want to motivate you, and I want to inspire you."