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The Origins of Tea

From the multiplicity of charming legends going back about 5,000 years, tea has the distinction of being the most ancient beverage (after water of course) in the world. But its exact origins are lost in antiquity.

According to the Chinese legend, Emperor Chen-Nung, the Divine Cultivator, discovered tea accidentally as he was boiling water under the shade of a wild tea bush. The leaves were gently rustling in the breeze when a few leaves dropped into his pot. The Emperor drank the resulting infusion and felt himself overwhelmed with a sense of well being. Tea was thus born.

The Indians attribute the discovery to Prince Bodhi Dharma, son of King Kosjuwo. He had left India to go north, preaching Buddhism along the way. He vowed never to sleep during his seven year mediation. At the end of five years, he was overwhelmed with lassitude and drowsiness, but a providential chance made him pick and chew some leaves of an unidentified tree. The tree was a large tea bush, and its astonishing properties allowed him to keep his vow.

The legends may differ about the discovery of tea, but they all agree that tea has some astonishing properties.

To the lone drinker, the tea's subtle flavor and aroma serve to focus and calm the mind. Shared by two it acts as an unobtrusive third entity bridging the two poles of conversation. A simple cup of tea could contain the elements for the social, sensual and even the spiritual.

Tea has been rediscovered a number of times since its original discovery. When tea was first discovered, it was only manufactured as a Green tea by the Chinese by steam firing the tea leaves. Pan firing it paved the way to Oolongs and Black Teas. The British discovered tea growing wild in Assam, India in the year 1823. The "Roorvan" continuous process machine was developed to manufacture CTC teas (crush, tear, curl). Well before the discovery of Indian Teas, one important development took place and that was Earl Grey Tea. This in turn, would propagate the incredible range of flavored teas throughout the world.

More recently came the world of tea bags, iced teas, instant and ready to drink teas, as well as decaffeinated teas. The latest rediscovery of tea has been in the form of Chai, or rather "Masala Chai". Masala Chai is tea prepared with a blend of spices. One can see how tea is a continually evolving beverage.



The Route of Tea

In the fourth century AD tea was already a popular drink in China. Tea developed through three main stages: Boiled tea, Mashed or Beaten tea and Infused tea. The three "Tea Schools are indicative of the spirit of their respective ages which correspond to the Tang, Song and Ming Dynasties".

In the eighth century tea became a royal beverage adopted by the nobility as an elegant pastime. Poet Ly Uy, at the height of the Tang Dynasty, wrote the first book on tea "Ch'a King" or "The Tea Code".

Tea has always been linked to history, and as it spread, it brought people into contact with different religions and philosophies. Indian history mentions Marco Polo, the great traveler who brought tea from China to the court of the famous Indian emperor Harsha Vardhana.

In Japan, tea was mainly introduced in the Ninth Century by a Buddhist Monk, Saicho. For the Japanese, tea became more than just a drink. The tea ceremony, whose aim is to help the spirit find peace, has effectively straddled centuries and borders. Via the caravan routes, tea penetrated all Mongol Lands, Iran, the Muslim countries and Russia before reaching Europe.

Since Europe had long periods of no contact with the Orient, they therefore learned about tea relatively late. Not until it was brought by an Arab trader by the name of Suleiman.

It was not until 1610 that tea really began its large-scale expansion of consumption in the western world. The East India Company established relations with the far west by introducing tea into Holland in 1610, to France in 1636 and to England in 1650. Tea was brought to New York in the American colonies by Dutch ships around 1650. Confused at first, the colonists boiled the tea, threw away the water and consumed the leaves as vegetables. But before long Americans too were drinking a proper cup of tea, and also inventing the tea bag (by accident) and iced tea (during a heat wave at the world's fair in Chicago).

In the nineteenth century, China was virtually the sole supplier of tea in the world. In 1834 tea plantations were introduced in India and to Ceylon a little later in 1857. Thereafter Asia, Africa and South America followed. The competition between ship owners for the speediest transportation of tea led to races along the far east shipping routes. This was the origin of the "Tea Clipper" races.



The Art of Living with Tea

By the eighth century, the appreciation of tea had been raised to an art and integrated into religious rituals by Taoists, who revered it as "the froth for Jade", the elixir of morality. Even today, in China tea is a major feature of any important ceremony. For instance, it symbolizes longevity and marital fidelity at a wedding, since tea bushes live a hundred years and more.

Tea Types

Tea comes from the evergreen bush *Camellia Sinensis*. It is a single species but of more than one variety with stiff and shining pointed leaves. The tea plant is an ideal plantation crop requiring a warm, wet climate of the tropics with a considerable amount of rainfall. It can be grown from an altitude of a few feet to above 6,000 feet above mean sea level. Though the highest yield is obtained from teas grown in the lower altitudes, it is the high grown teas which have the finest quality. The cooler, drier climate at that altitude causes the plant to grow more slowly, producing a richer, more flavorful leaf. Tea is propagated from seeds and, through more modern methods, from clones or cuttings from specially selected bushes that show an ideal combination of characteristics. Though the tea plant is obligingly easy to grow, it is surprisingly difficult to get good quality tea from it.

The reason is that tea, like wine, depends on its characteristics from soil, garden management, rainfall, elevation, and manufacture.

All the different types of tea come from the same plant. The chief difference lies in processing. The most popular type of tea is Black, which is oxidized or fermented. Oolongs are partly fermented and Greens are not fermented at all. Another variety of tea that is not as well known is White Tea.

BLACK TEA - FULLY FERMENTED

The traditional method of processing Black tea involves four basic steps: Withering, Rolling, Fermenting and Drying or Firing.

The tea leaves are first withered on conveyor belts for several hours until they are limp enough to be rolled without cracking. They are then rolled on machines. The rolling of the leaves gives them their future form. The rolling of the tea leaves facilitates even fermentation. The rolled leaves are then spread out in a cool place. The leaves absorb the oxygen in the air which activates the enzymes to create essential oils. This process is called oxidation or fermentation. The leaves are then fired in large ovens with temperatures up to 194 degrees. They are then graded and packed into chests.



India produces the world's finest black teas. Darjeeling, a tea growing region of India, produces the world's most sought after teas. Teas from Darjeeling have over the years acquired the reputation of being the "Champagne of Teas". Assam, another tea growing region of India, is the world's single largest tea growing region. Assam produces tea with strength. Black teas are also produced in Nuwara Eliya, Dimbulla and Uva regions of Ceylon. Black teas from China are produced in the An-Hui and Yunnan provinces. An-Hui is the home of world class Keemun teas. Keemun teas are referred to as the King of Red Teas. (Black teas are referred to as Red Teas in China). Yunnan produces teas similar to the Assams of India. Strong and robust. Black teas are also produced in the following countries: South Africa, Indonesia, Java, Argentina, Turkey, Russia, Vietnam, Nepal and several additional African countries.

OOLONG TEA - PARTLY FERMENTED

The Green tea leaves undergo a short fermentation process which places them halfway between Black and Green tea. Oolongs are mainly produced in South China and Formosa. Oolongs are considered by the Chinese to be the most health-giving teas. The world's finest Oolongs, however, are manufactured in Formosa. The quality of an Oolong depends upon the knowledge of the tea maker to manage the fermentation process. The fermentation process can be manipulated to create extraordinary teas. The higher the percentage of fermentation, the stronger the strength of the tea when brewed. Recently Oolongs have also been manufactured out of the Darjeeling and Nilgiri regions of India.

GREEN TEA - UNFERMENTED

Green tea is dried and rolled, but not fermented. The leaves are rolled or twisted in a variety of ways. The most commonly known Green tea is Gunpowder Green. Although India and Ceylon have started producing Green teas, China still remains the leader in the process of manufacturing Green teas. The most renowned Green teas from China are Pi Lo Chun, Lung Ching and Silver Dragon.

WHITE TEA

The art of manufacturing White tea has been mastered by the Chinese and hence the best White teas come from China. This tea is purely a collection of buds with white hairy downs. Very little processing is done in the manufacture of White tea. The tea leaves are slightly steamed and then mostly sun dried. The tea brews an extremely light, delicate cup with a vegetative flavor. The tea, as it sounds, looks white and is probably the most prestigious and romantic of all the different types of teas. Recently some White teas have been produced in Darjeeling and also in Ceylon. Very small quantities of White tea are produced and since it is also very labor intensive, they are one of the highest priced teas.



HERBAL/FRUIT TEA

Herbal and Fruit teas contain no actual tea leaves. They may be composed of many kinds of fruits, flowers and other botanicals like rooibos and peppermint.

SCENTED TEA

Scented teas are Black, Oolong or Green teas that have been dried along with flowers and/or fruits.

FLAVORED TEA

Flavored teas are usually, but not always, Black teas infused with the natural aromatic oils of spices, flowers, nuts and fruits. They may contain actual pieces of dried fruit, peel, blossoms and spice.

Tea Grading

Grading tea is complicated and may be done differently in each country. Tea grows in what are called "flushes". The most prized flush of the season is the first. (During the height of the season, tea bushes may flush every week, but the flavor is not as complex.) After a flush is plucked (picked) and processed, the leaves are graded by size. All teas fall into four broad categories: Whole Leaf, Broken Leaf, Fannings and Dust.

Black tea is subject to the most extensive grading system. The first grade of a Black tea is called OP or Orange Pekoe (pronounced peek-oh). The term "Orange Pekoe" refers to a size of leaf rather than to a flavor. Pekoe is derived from the Chinese work "Pak-Ho" meaning white hair, which refers to the silvery down on new leaves and buds. One explanation for the "Orange" half of the name is that the Chinese sometimes used to flavor these leaves with Orange Blossoms. Another suggests that it is a remaining reference to the Netherlands House of Orange, a powerful entity in the early days of tea trading. Today, "Orange Pekoe" describes leaves, specifically the best tender leaves plucked from tips of the plant's young shoots. These prized leaves get graded as follows during the manufacturing process.



WHOLE LEAF

Special Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe

SFTGFOP

This grade is primarily used to grade Darjeeling teas with a large proportion of leaves having golden tips on New Leaf buds - a guarantee of quality. *Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe*

FTGFOP

Another grade primarily used to grade Indian black teas consisting of exceptional quality Orange Pekoe with lots of tips.

Orange Pekoe

OP

Long, pointed leaves that are harvested when the terminal buds open into leaf. Rarely contains "tips".

Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe

GFOP

Flowery Orange Pekoe with a certain amount of golden tips.

Flowery Pekoe

FP

Shorter, coarser leaves. The next leaves down from Orange Pekoe.

Pekoe Souchong

PS

Pekoe leaf further broken down is Pekoe Souchong.

Souchong

Shorter and tightly rolled leaf style (for Indian Souchong). But when used for grading Chinese teas, this refers to large leaves.



Pouchong

A variety of tea that is very rare. The leaf is extra large and when brewed, the infused leaf extends to at least an inch to an inch and a half in length.

BROKEN LEAF

Golden Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe

GFBOP

Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe

FBOP

Golden Broken Orange Pekoe

GBOP

Tippy Golden Broken Orange Pekoe

TGBOP

Broken Orange Pekoe

BOP



FANNINGS

Leaf size that is smaller than Broken Orange Pekoe is graded as fannings. This grade is primarily used in tea bags since it brews very quickly and its size is small.

Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings

BPOF

DUST

The leaf size smaller than Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings is graded as Dust. Dust grades brew an extra strong cup and are popular with caterers and are also used in tea bags.

The mentioned grades are the ones which are widely used. A grade of tea only describes the leaf style of that particular tea and not the quality. Quality of tea can only be decided after tasting it.



Household Uses of Tea

To avoid teapots taking a musty smell when not in use, put a sugar lump in the bottom and do not replace the lid.

To get rid of tea stains: If recent, rub with lemon or with hot soapy water. If the cloth is woolen or silk, dilute an egg yolk with warm water, rub lightly, rinse and dry. If not recent, soak in water with some glycerin.

To get rid of the smell of fish or onion in a frying pan, rub with wet tea leaves.

To clean painted wood work, nothing works better than strong tea.

To clean a rug and revive its colors, spread dry tea leaves on it and brush it off.

To match up odd stockings, put them into a strong tea infusion. They will all take on a uniform golden tint.

Used tea leaves are an excellent fertilizer for potted plants. Watering plants occasionally with tea is also a good idea.

Tea and Beauty

Copper highlights may be given to auburn hair by rinsing in tea.

Tea with a few drops of lemon juice is an excellent astringent for greasy skin.

A tea infusion in purified water with a little sugar is a wonderful balm for the skin after shaving or cleansing and is also used in the East for personal hygiene.

Tea compresses are very restful for tired eyes.

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