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The Tradition of Tea

By Jennifer M. Carson, CC, CHE

"No one lives long enough to know everything about tea," reads an ancient Fujian proverb.... But, wouldn't that be a noble attempt?

The tradition of tea comes from many different cultures, many different places. It is the most widely consumed beverage in the world, second to water.

Tea comes from the broad leaf evergreen *Camellia sinensis*. It thrives in tropical and subtropical regions often grows in areas surrounded by high mountain peaks or jungles.

Tea Varieties

The beverage is classified into five different categories: Black, oolong, green, white, and herbals.

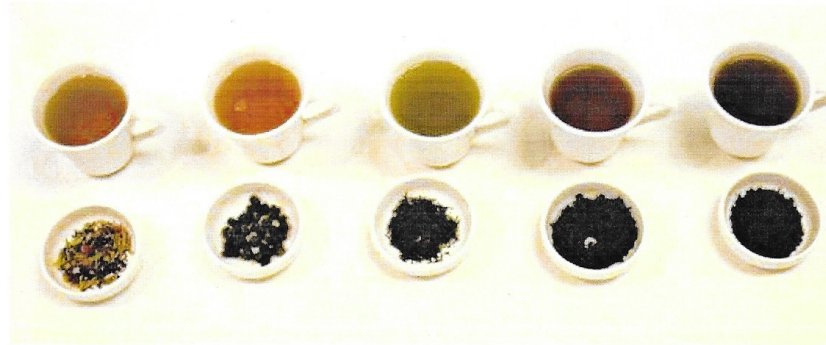
Black tea is a fully oxidized or fermented tea that yields a hearty-flavored, amber brew. It is made from a multi-step process. Withering removes moisture, rolling encourages oxidation, fermentation allows for a color change, drying removes moisture, and grading to quality. It has strong, rich liquor.

Oolong tea is only partially fermented. It has a more delicate flavor than black tea, yet is richer than green tea.

Green tea is unfermented. It is steam heated, rolled, and dried. More astringent than black tea, it produces a subtle, pale, often bitter tea light green/golden in color.

White tea is a very rare tea from China. It is the least processed and is not oxidized or rolled, but simply withered and dried by steaming. It has a very mellow taste and a hint of sweetness. All white teas are made from buds; their infusions are pale golden and slightly sweet. They are highly prized and are generally taken with or without a meal. White teas are only produced in China, mainly Fukien (Fujian) Province.

Herbal tea is derived from other plants. These brews, usually decaffeinated, are often derived from flowers and herbs, as well as fruits.



From left to right: an herbal tea, white tea, green tea, oolong tea, and black tea.

It is said that tea was discovered in early 20th century BC, when Camellia flowers accidentally blew into pot of boiling water in China. The results were liked and new herbs and plants were tried. By the 8th cen Persian Caravan routes introduced tea to Western cultures.

Tea has many significant meanings in many cultures, including the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Russian English.

Asian Origins

China was the birthplace of tea, and so it has much significance in the Chinese culture, where it develop into an art form that was enjoyed by every class level. Regular harvesting began and different levels of t were developed.

The Chinese tea ceremony emphasizes the tea, rather than the ceremony. What the tea tastes like, sm like, and how one tea tastes compared to the previous tea, or in successive rounds of drinking is consid Using finely pointed chop sticks, tea is placed in the tea pot, and then boiling water is poured into it. Les than a minute later, the tea is poured into narrow cups, not pouring one cup at a time, but moving the tea around in a continual motion over the cups, so they filled together. "Each cup should taste exactly the same."

Introduced to by a Samurai warrior who taught the Chinese method of brewing, tea in Japan shares som the same cultural history and significance.

The Japanese had a ritual "Tocha." It was a game of the samurai, testing the knowledge of warriors of th taste of different teas. Tea was acknowledged as a custom, transcending language and cultures.

During a Japanese tea ceremony, the host brings in the simple tea wares and displays everything. The powdered tea (it is called macha) is placed in the tea bowl and covered with hot, not boiling, water. After being beaten into froth with a tea whisk, the drink is passed to the chief guest who sips and passes the to the next guest, and so it continues.

In the past, the host may have given away all of the tea wares and tea making implements, except the t which would be kept and then broken to symbolize the end of the ceremony.

Spreading to India

Silk Caravans throughout Persia were responsible for spreading tea throughout Eastern Europe and Asia First introduced to India, by the silk caravans traveling from the Orient to Europe, tea has become an intrinsic part of daily life. Eventually they combined the leaves with buffalo or yak's milk, and added ging and spices such as cardamom.

The discovery of Assam tea leaves occurred around 1820 and the industry in India was begun. The Eas India Shipping Company began exporting the tea to other areas in the Indian subcontinent. Not only doe India produce the most tea in the world, it grows some of the very best.

There are 3 main kinds of tea produced in India: Assam, Darjeeling, and Nilgiri.

Assam tea comes from the North Eastern section of the country.

The Darjeeling region is cool and wet, and tucked in the foothills of the Himalayas. The Darjeeling plants have three distinct harvests, and the tea produced from each of these "flushes" has a unique flavor. First flush teas are light and aromatic, while the second flush produces tea with a bit more bite. The third or autumn flush gives a tea that is lesser in quality.

Nilgiri tea comes from an even higher part of India than Darjeeling. The flavors of Nilgiri teas are subtle and rather gentle. They are frequently blended with other, more robust teas.

Besides the different kinds of tea that come from India, there is also a very unique style of *making* tea, called chai. There are lots of various recipes to make chai, but the basic ingredients are: black tea, milk, sugar, and spices. The most common spices used are cardamom, ginger, cloves, cinnamon and even pepper.

England Embraces the Brew

In England, tea took a long time to get to where it is today. Once upon a time, English citizens turned their noses up at tea, considering it distasteful and unhealthy. In the 17th century, however, tea and tea traditions became an obsession of King Charles II. The queen introduced tea as a breakfast quaff to replace ale. I drank brewed, and was available all day long.

In the mid 18th century, Anna, Duchess of Bedford, established tea time. It was a 5:00 in the afternoon that began because of hunger pangs. The tradition stuck of entertaining friends with a pot tea, a few small cakes, and pastries. Tea was proclaimed the national drink of England by the end of 17th century.

America's Tempestuous Relationship

America had recently completed the French and Indian War. Since England had financed the war, they figured that the colonists should have to pay for it. They imposed a higher tax on newspapers, tavern licenses, legal documents, marriage licenses, and docking papers. The colonists rebelled against taxes imposed upon them without their consent and which were so repressive. New, heavier taxes were levied by Parliament for such rebellion. Among these was the tea tax that was to become the watershed of America's desire for freedom. In December of 1773 about 50 members of the political organization, The Sons of Liberty, boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and plunked \$9,659 worth of Darjeeling into the sea. This event, now known as The Boston Tea Party, was the start of the quest for American independence.

Russia's Customs

The Russian dynasty also had an obsession for tea. Excellent tea was created in imperial Russia from teas brought overland by camel from Asia. Because the trade route was dangerous and supplies unstable, Russian tea merchants combined the varying incoming tea cargoes, selling a blend rather than a single tea form. It was usually a combination of China and India black teas, or with herbal teas.

The Russian favored this tea all day long, but modern tea drinkers seem to prefer it at breakfast and with elegant afternoon tea fare. It is served with milk and sugar. Tea for meals was served in an elegant egg-shaped, or round teapots, with long, beautifully curved spouts, and a strong handle. Tea services were crafted with the same care and elegance as the Faberge eggs.

About the time when St. Petersburg was built in 1618, a hot water urn was developed to make tea more convenient. This was called a Samovar. It is like an urn, with a spigot, and a teapot on top. This was used to serve tea all day long. If a samovar was not available, teapots were stacked on one of the other. The bottom pot was the largest, and contained steaming water for diluting the teas. The next pot contained strong black tea. The smallest pot on the top contained mint, or herbal tea. The teas were poured, as to the drinker's preference.

Tea has spread from one edge of the earth to the other. It has created new countries, and torn others apart. Tea is not a fashion statement, but a tradition. The tradition of tea can have shaped the



world into what it is today, and maybe one day, we might know everything about tea.

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