

A Tea Maker's Story

Posted on

The crinkling sound of a tea packet being brought home, the feel and texture of loose tea leaves in your hand, followed by the aroma of freshly brewed goodness poured into a large cup, all create a unique experience.

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The process of straining tea.



The exterior of a tea shop located in a rural town.

Tea, introduced by the British during their colonisation of Sri Lanka (former Ceylon) in the 1800s, has become a traditional drink and a favourite of many Sri Lankans. Along rural roadsides, tea shops, known as tea *kades*, are a common sight. Research indicates that the first recorded tea plant in Sri Lanka appeared in 1824 when the British brought it from India and planted it at the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens (now part of Peradeniya University) for non-commercial purposes. The process of tea making is a ritual in itself. A tea maker lights a fire, boils water in a jug, scoops leaves from a container, adds them to a jug, brews the tea, and finally serves the tea hot. While the method has remained unchanged, the ingredients frequently vary, and it was extraordinary for us to see women doing what is usually considered a man's role.

Tea pluckers are the true backbone of the tea industry, ensuring that the leaves are picked, sorted, and sifted—from identifying the leaves in the lush hedges of the

central highlands to the packets found on supermarket shelves.

During our visit to the highlands, we stopped at various tea *kades* along the roadside. Most were owned by women, with only few shops run by men. We inquired about how they entered the tea business and how many years they had been in trade. One woman, dressed beautifully in a cloth and jacket, shared that she had been working in the same tea shop for over 50 years, which was incredibly fascinating. She walked us through the tea-making process, showing us her two-burner stove, strainer, containers for tea and sugar, and the pot used to boil water. She also mentioned that she occasionally makes a Beli Mal drink, offering us some for feedback.

Another woman we visited used a barrel to make tea, which was a rare sight. She prepared piping hot tea with ginger, serving it in brown mugs with a smile. Other tea makers added white sugar for sweetness, while in other regions of the country, tea is served plain or with condensed milk. Near Nuwareliya town, we visited a two-part shop at nightfall, which served tea in small cups and also had food on display for customers. Fish buns, rolls, bread, including Kimbula Banis, were a few items on sale. In Colombo, on the Colpetty side of Marine Drive, we encountered a man at a small rented shop who made tea in his own way. He lamented that fewer customers stop by nowadays due to the rise of instant tea. The structures of tea shops differ—some built with mud, water, sand, cement, wood, and/or aluminium sheets, with no firm structure. The *kades* we visited, both in the city and rural spaces, had furniture that consisted only of plastic chairs and two or three tables.

Today, tea has become an act of convenience than a slow-paced, enjoyable activity or trade, reflecting the demands of our fast-paced world. However, a few places in Sri Lanka still showcase the traditional art of tea-making, keeping the age-old customs alive.



Buying instant tea and ready-to-eat meals.

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Area where tea is stored.



Making Beli Mal.



Pot at a rural tea shop near Yala.



Setting in a rural tea shop.



Interior of a tea shop.



A stop over for tea in Nuwara Eliya



A rare sight – a tea maker using a barrel to brew tea



A display case of food.



Colour coordinated at a tea shop.