

Blending a Perfect Cuppa



Tea tasting line; the tea is judged on taste, appearance and leaf size

The art of tea is an adage so common, that we all miss the fact that the 'quiet' beverage before us is a recipe that has been skilfully blended by connoisseurs who read tea leaves best.

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Tea is consumed for many reasons. Some call it the beverage of intellectuals, while others praise its quality of bringing cheer and banishing gloom. For Sri Lankans, tea is an everyday must-have beverage that they cannot live without. Yet, what is brewed in hot water is seldom known to be a meticulously prepared formula. The tea we drink, unless specified, are in fact a blend of teas obtained from several different plantations and from different tea producing regions grown under several varying climatic conditions. A perfect brew, where it is the consistency in taste that tea buffs appreciate. This alone makes tea blending a form of art.

Tea is a crop exposed to many changes of nature. One may expect the leaves of every tea bush to be consistent, but the produce from the seven tea producing regions of the country differ. Even leaves from one plantation to another in the same region are not the same. Even tea from the same plantation and from the same factory may differ on two different days of production. Therefore, blending tea is essential as producers must deliver a quality product in terms of flavour or brew performance. What ensures brand loyalty is in creating a blend that the tea drinker is used to by cleverly managing variations.

Black tea that is purchased from the Ceylon Tea Auction is chosen based on six attributes. The particle size, appearance of the leaf, aroma, colour, mouth feel and the weight of the tea on the tongue; these are all taken into account. Tea is also graded based on the size by each factory. The packets of tea widely available in shops, tea kiosks and in supermarkets across Sri Lanka actually fall under the BOPF grade, which are well-paired with milk. Grades such as Pekoe, OP1 (Orange Pekoe) and BOP are usually best enjoyed without any milk or sugar. The Tea

Taster's responsibility lies in creating the ideal blend for that perfect cuppa. Each blend as its own recipe. A tray will be lined up with samples of teas that will make its way to the next auction. These are scored based on region, elevation, aroma, mouth feel, taste and its intensity. Variations in tea leaves from a single region is minimal, but the variations between regions will be greater and the blends consist of leaves within and outside of the region. This differentiation is key to achieve consistency and character.

Tea is pre-arranged on a palette base prior to being moved to a hopper for sifting and it is then tipped into a conveyer belt.

With great finesse and while paying great attention to the minute attributes of the tea, various teas with different scores are fused to achieve the desired taste. Skill and experience is an important factor here as after all the tea produced may vary depending on the weather performance of the leaf during a particular period of the year. Once everything is taken into account, the final role is to make a decision on what to bid for at the Colombo Tea Auction. Tea that is purchased is then graded and is stored in a warehouse before the tea blending process.



There are various leaf grades of tea

Tea blending in the past was a labour intensive process of dropping tea from a height onto the floor and men and women would mix the lot by hand. Today it is considered far more an efficient and technology-base process, where tea is often blended either in a Drum Blender or Gravity Blender.

The systematic process is quite mesmerising. Tea is pre-arranged on a palette base prior to being moved to a hopper for sifting and it is then tipped into a conveyer belt. As the beastly machines swirl and blend the air is filled with the aroma of tea. Once blended, tea is weighed and packed and delivered for value addition by buyers.

The blending process is like a sacred text to maintaining balance and uniformity. Comprehensive thinking and countless energy goes into creating a blend. Brewed in a mere five minutes, take a moment to appreciate the effort that goes into creating your favourite cuppa.

