From Bush To Cup

Posted on

The seeds of Sri Lanka’s successful tea industry were first sown 190 years ago when a few seedlings brought from China were planted at the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens. But it was not until 1867, coincidentally the year the first train steamed into Kandy, that the first field of tea was planted at Loolecondera Estate near Kandy.

Words Royston Ellis

The planter who created what became known as Pure Ceylon Tea was a Scot, James Taylor. He tried to replicate the green tea of China by rolling and roasting the harvested leaves in vats on his veranda. It seems he got it wrong, because instead of green tea he produced black tea.

It was six years before Loolecondera tea was shipped to London and 15 years before Ceylon tea began to win market favour. It was fortuitous that the railway came to Kandy at the same time as tea, thereby providing the means to transport tea to Colombo for shipment to England.

Tea’s popularity was due to another Scot, the merchant Thomas Lipton, who in 1890 opened up an office in Colombo and began buying Sri Lanka’s plantations so he could grow tea for his own chain of shops in Britain thus cutting out the middleman. He followed the principle: “fresh from the tea garden to the tea pot.”

The journey from tea bush to tea taster’s spoon takes just 24 hours, although it could be months before that manufactured tea is brewed to make one of the billion cups drunk around the world every day.

The tea bush is actually an evergreen tree called camellia (*Camellia sinensis*) which could grow up to 10m in height if it were not pruned every two or three years. The pruning encourages the repeated growth of a ‘flush’ of fresh young shoots throughout the year. These shoots, of two top leaves and a bud, are plucked every six to ten days.

On arrival at the tea factory, the harvested leaves are spread out in a trough to wither until they lose their moisture and go limp.The withered leaves are fed into a rolling machine that crushes their cell structure, releasing the natural enzymes that give tea its flavour.

The leaves emerge from the machine in twisted sticky lumps. Oxidisation, called fermentation, takes place then in about three hours, changing the pulverised leaf into a light coppery shade through the absorption of oxygen. Firing (drying) in a hot air chamber for about 20 minutes halts the fermentation, kills off any bacteria, dries the tea and preserves it.

The fired leaf is left to cool before being sifted. An amazing machine that shimmies and shakes like a fairground whirligig, sieves the leaf through different meshes to isolate the large leaf particles from the smaller ones.

Another production method, called CTC because the leaf is Cut, Torn and Curled by machine instead of being rolled, is also used in Sri Lanka to produce a leaf manufactured only for mass produced tea bags.

At the end of the manufacturing process the tea that was produced during the previous 24 hours is tasted by the planter or the factory’s tea taster. The taster’s experience is acquired through years of practice and he inspects the manufactured tea before looking at the infused leaf and then the liquor. He tastes to discover the tea’s personality.

The manufactured tea is put into air-tight paper sacks and sent to Colombo for auction. There, buyers taste the tea to find the flavour they need to blend with other teas from Sri Lanka to produce their own brand name tea. This ensures that a brand's English Breakfast Tea, for example, will always taste the same.

Large leaf tea is prized by connoisseurs for its lighter, subtle flavour and is best drunk plain, without milk or sugar and is known as OP (Orange Pekoe), Pekoe (P) and Flowery Pekoe (FP). Broken leaf grades are Broken Orange Pekoe (BOP), Broken Pekoe (BP) Fannings (F) and the unfortunately named Dust (not sweepings from the factory floor but a very fine grade).

A further distinction comes from where the tea is actually grown. Traditionally the most refined tea is "High Grown" on plantations above an elevation of 1,200m, where the crisp climate has a crucial effect on quality.

"Medium grown" teas, which produce a liquor with a rich, mellow taste and good colour, are grown at heights of between 660m and 1,200m. "Low grown" teas are mostly grown in small tea gardens in the south and bought more for leaf appearance than taste.

How to brew the perfect cuppa? Start with tea leaves (no, not a mass market tea bag) that will yield a pleasing liquor: OP for a light colour; BOP for a dark gold to which a little milk could be added; and BOPF, Fannings or Dust for a rich, dark liquor drunk with milk and sugar.

To savour the tea properly (untainted by the chemicals in tap water) bring a kettle of bottled mineral water to the boil and pour the water immediately onto the tea leaves (a teaspoonful per person and one for the pot) in a good ceramic teapot. Add a tea cosy and let it brew for three to five minutes. Serve the infusion through a tea strainer. For a second cup, make another pot.