Ceylon Tea: A Sri Lankan Legend

Posted on



Tamil women pickers with their bright sarees and shoulder-baskets have become a kind of trademark of Ceylon tea.
Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

Among the many records to its credit, Sri Lanka can claim to produce the finest teas in the world. And as such, it is the world’s leading exporter of superb hillside grown black teas. Tea-growing in Sri Lanka began a little over a century ago, during the British colonial era. It was introduced as an afterthought to coffee, which was ravaged by an uncontrollable past. Today, with more than half a million acres under the crop, and a daily output of about one million pounds of manufactured tea, it is Sri Lanka’s main export and source of foreign revenue from a strictly native resource.

James Taylor pioneered commercial tea-growing in Sri Lanka in 1867 in a remote and lovely area called Loolecandura. Like his sturdy mother-bushes, tea has survived many sore trials, among them diseases such as blister blight and tea tortrix, as well as periodic price slumps. A tree camellia (botanically Camellia sinensis), tea needs a sub-tropical climate and sloping terrain. Mutations in flavor and strength record nuances in altitude, soil, rain and sun, and tea flavor, like whiskey, varies from glen to glen.

The abundant rain and sunshine of Sri Lanka's foothills produce luxuriant ro th but diffuse flavor. These low and mediumgTown t as are useful, however, as blending "fillers", in trade jargeon. In the high sierra, brilliant sunshine, cold nights, easonal dry winds and the nursing of mists retard growth but conserve and distill an unmistakable and inimitable flavor in the leaves. These plants produce the precious, aromatic high-grown teas of Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula and Uva, those which have spread the fame of Ceylon teas throughout the bonded warehouses and auction rooms of Mincing Lane, the London headquarters of international tea trade.

Tea is grown in some of Sri Lanka's dramatically beautiful areas; tea estates, as the plantations are called, are especially scenic at the higher elevations where cloud-crowned mountains, deep valleys, dizzy chasms, pure cool scented air and the music of falling water are al ways close at hand. Graceul grevillea and gum trees planted for shade and wind-break form patch-work fields of the closely-cropped carpet of tea bushes. Drifts of colorful wild-flowers that defy the most determined of weeders draw patterns against the brilliant green that stretch endlessly over valley and spur. Neat ticky- tacky processing factories give out a strong, fragrant aroma of toasting tea leaves.

Tea is grown from seed or cuttings of the pedlgree mother-bushes and is contour-planted to anchor the topsoil. Bushes are stunted to a workable height by hard pruning. The tender terminal shoots (two leaves and a bud) are picked in a ten-day rotation usually byTamil women-pickers, many of South Indian stock who, with their bright sarees and shoulder-baskets, have become a kind of trademark of the tea industry. The entire work-force on a tea estate, from Superintendant – always known as the P .D., Peria Dorai, literally "Big Boss" in Tamil – to pickers live on the property. Most estates are crowned with a picturesque chalet with bow-windows and fireplaces, and gardens where tropical orchids and ferns riot among pretty English garden flowers. Built during the colonial period for the British planters, these grand houses are usually home to the P. D. The processing of green leaf into black tea is a tricky and precise art, and a good tea-maker, like a master brewer, requires

a high degree of skill. In the first stage, the leaf is dried on racks; it is then passed through rollers and broken up to release the aromatic juices. The next stage, oxidization, takes place in the damp, cool air of the fermentation room.

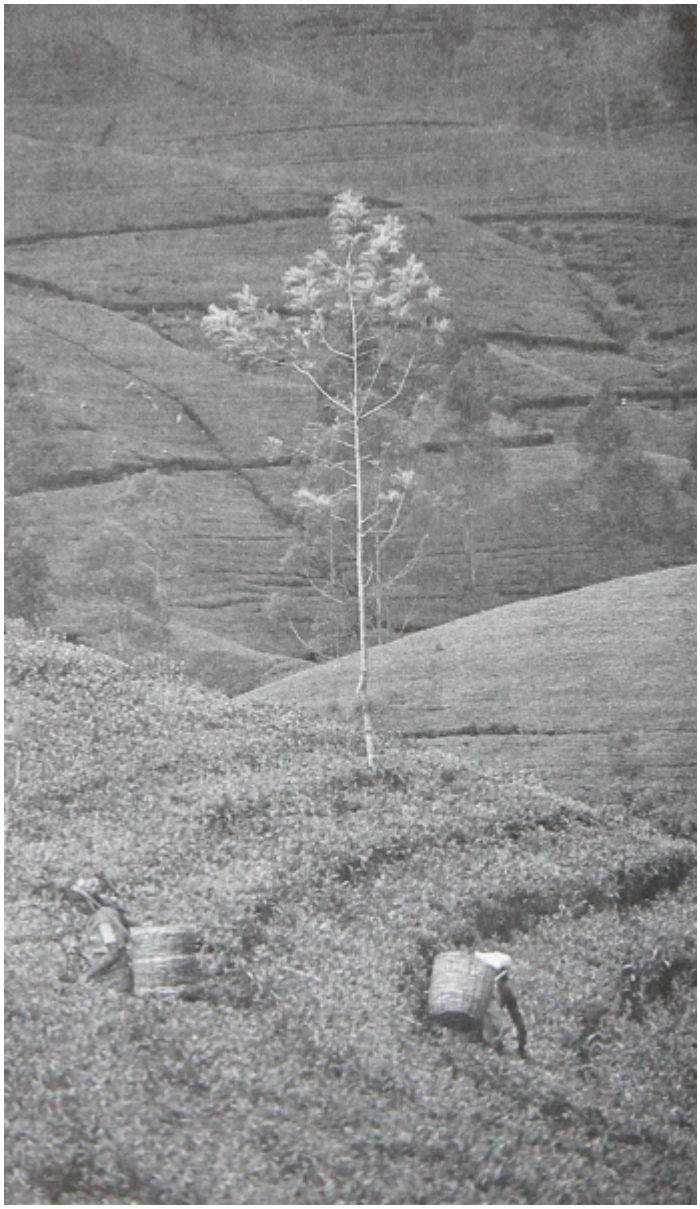
The green tea now turns a coppery color; it is then fired to stop further oxidization. The process is now complete – black, dry, fragrant and reduced to a fourth of its original weight, the tea is now sifted and graded by size into leaf, broken, fannings and dust, and by quality into varieties which are the superlatives of the trade: Pekoe, Orange Pekoe, Souchong, Tippy and Flowery. Flavor experts taste samples and label them as “malty, pointy, bakey, thick, coppery, dull or bright” according to flavor, strength and color. True to its original cultivators’ taste, tea in Sri Lanka is usually prepared in the British manner – fairly strong with milk and sugar. Particularly in the villages, it is also drunk black, some- times spiced with fresh ginger. But to each his or her own. Tea, like any brew, is best when it suits the palate. You can taste, smell and purchase teas as well as tour the pro- duction facilities at many of the tea estates along the main roads throughout the hill country. Most upland tour itineraries include a visit to a tea estate and factory. Some even arrange an overnight stay in tea estate bungalows, situated in quiet, scenic surroundings.

The following estate bungalows are recommended by the Ceylon Tourist Board:

Kirchchayan Bungalow Aislaby Estate, Bandarawela Reservations: 20862, 21101-10
Meena Ella Estate
Nuwar Eliya
Hakgala
Tel: 547715 Ottery Estate Bungalow Dickoya
Tel: 0512-521

It is also possible to attend tea auctions in Colombo. Travel agents can make these arrangements. You can purchase some of Sri Lanka’s best teas, with assistance in selecting various grades and flavors, at the Ceylon Tea Board. There are two locations: one at the Colombo Airport at Katunayake, and another at 574 Galle Road near Kollupitiya (Colombo 3). Visitors are allowed to take up to three kilograms of Cey Ion tea out of the country duty-free.

Another reputable tea outlet is – Mlesna (Ceylon) Ltd.
85-1/2 Ward Place
Colombo 7, Tel: 596348, 597358



Closely cropped carpets of tea bushes stretch over valley and spur throughout the central hill country.