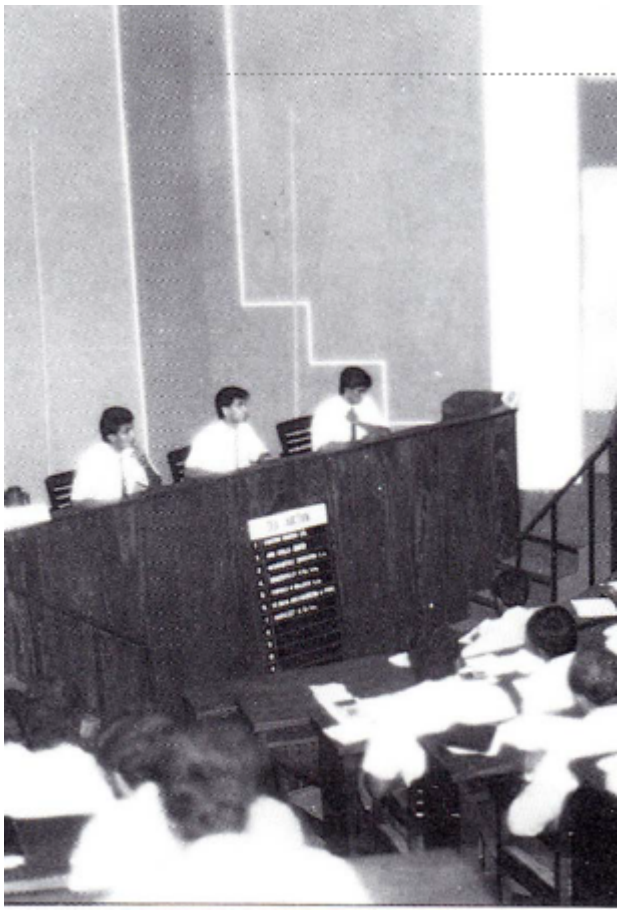
Flowery Fannings under the Hammer

Posted on



On July 30, 1883, an Englishman named William Somerville auctioned a lot of 6,500lbs of tea, thus starting a tradition which has grown to become one of the mainstays of Sri Lanka’s tea trade.

Tea was first grown in Ceylon in 1824 at the Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, near Kandy, when a few plants were brought from China; more were introduced from Assam in 1839. In 1867, a Scottish planter, James Taylor, planted tea seedlings on eight hectares of forest land which had actually been cleared for coffee planting. Taylor’s foresight was remarkable because two years later a blight wiped out Ceylon’s coffee crop so the island’s planters had to turn to tea.

Tea sold for 45 cents a pound when Somerville held his first tea auction 16 years after Taylor planted the motherbushes at the remote and lovely Loolecondera Estate. Now, over a century after the first tea auction, Somervilles are still in business as one of the seven tea brokers taking part in the Colombo tea auction where nine million kilos of tea go under the hammer every week, with prices averaging between Rs80 and Rs90 a kilo.

Many rules and customs govern the tea auctions and to comprehend the intricacies we must first look at the tea trade itself. A tea garden is always called an estate in Sri Lanka and the majority of these have been state-owned since I 975, managed by two state agencies, the Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation and the Janatha Estate Development Board. These agencies manage a total of 117,762 hectares while 98,9 I 7 hectares of tea estates are privately owned.

Tea will grow only on rolling terrain and is classified by elevation into three main groups. Low grown teas are those grown below 550m; medium grown elevations range from 550m to 1,220m. The high grown teas, prized for their flavour, are those grown on elevations of over 1,220m. Tea is grown in Sri Lanka up to about 2,500m.

Quality tea must meet all the criteria a tea drinker would look for: flavour, an attractive, bright coppery or orange colour, good “liquoring” properties which give body or strength to the tea, and a bouquet or fragrance. High gro□□n teas usually score on flavour and colour while low and medium grown tea have a good liquor. Blending usually gives a good mix of flavour, liquor, colour and bouquet.

Distinct market preferences exist in the tea trade. The UK, the rest of Europe, the USA, Japan and Australia usually buy the flavoury, high-priced, high grown teas while most Middle East countries and Egypt opt for low and medium grown tea.

The tea auctions are conducted by the Colombo Tea Traders Association at the elegant new building of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, located m a lakeside setting at Colombo’s Navam Mawatha. Auctions are held on Mondays and Tuesdays when the produce of both state-owned and private tea estates are offered for sale by the seven brokers to buyers from all over the world.
Tea trading laws in Sri Lanka make it mandatory for exporters to buy tea through these seven brokers: John Keells, Somerville, Mercantile Brokers, Forbes & Walker, Bartleet, De Silva Abeywardena and Peiris, and Eastern Brokers.

The auction opens on Mondays and Tuesdays at 08.30 and goes on until around

18.00hrs. The tasteful, muted decor of the high-ceilinged, comfortable auditorium is the perfect foil to the fast, brisk bidding which comes from the buyers and exporters crowding the tiered seats.

The auctioneer calls out the estate, grade of tea and One price, often finally hears announcing household the names name of like the Brookebuyer. Bond, packers. Lipton The and catalogues many give other the buyer London-based all the tea number numbers necessary of and data chests such warehouse on as estate offer, details. of total origin, weight, grade of invoice tea,
Each broker in turn auctions off his teas as listed in down the the catalogue, name of helped the by buyer two and the recorders closing who price.take for Buyers Colombo teas are or bought. given still in seven They the days estate might to be stores. complete warehoused payment.

To the uninitiated, the thick sheaf of pale green tissue contains which only is the codes. auction The catalogue auctioneer’s is rapid puzzling staccatoas it is seven.” no bee-oh-pee, help ay-emm, either: stroke “Fifty-four, twelve, two, forty, zero, fifty-one, three, and seven.

My friend from the Tea Traders Association obligingly orange decodes pekoe, it. “Forty one cases kilos of high grown broken orange pekoe, fifty one kilos in each case, total two thousand and thirty seven kilos from the Glenanore Estate of the State Plantations Corporation warehoused at Bloemendahl road, Colombo.

Eighty-five open the auctioneer and gets a host of quick offers. Selling at ninety to Brooke Bond. Another lot of tea is sold and it has taken just over 25 seconds.

