Mlesna: The Perfect Foil for Ceylon Tea

Posted on



I wonder what the winners buy – One half as precious as the stuff they sell'. One wonders too, with Omar Khayyam, about the tea planters of Sri I.anka, or rather Ceylon. For Ceylon is a place name that is also a superlative, the same way that scotch, champagne, cognac and burgundy are, and like all of these, even permissible to be written in lower case.

Every grocer in the world knows this simple fact -that Sri I.anka produces the best teas in the world. A tree camelia (botanically camelia sinensis), tea needs a sub-tropical climate and sloping terrain. Mutations in flavour and strength record nuances in altitude soil, rain and sun and tea, like whiskey varies from glen to glen. The abundant rain and sunshine of the foothills of Sri Lanka produce teas with body and strength -in the tea trade jargon, 'low and medium growns'. In the high sierra, brilliant sunshine, cold nights, seasonal dry winds and the nursing of mists retard growth but distil an inimitable and distinctive flavour in the leaf. These are the precious aromatic 'high growns' of Nuwara Eliya. Dimbula and Uva which have spread the fame of 'Ceylon' teas in the bonded warehouses and auction rooms of Mincing lane, the London headquarters of the international tea trade.

Until recently, packeted teas from Sri I.anka had a frumpy livery of foil and plain paper label. This rather stiff-necked attitude was a hang-over from the Britishd-ominated tea-trade; the main thing was to keep the flavour in. It also kept a beautiful personality under drab covers -Eliza Doolittle camouflaged in the flower-seller's rags.

And then Mlesna came along like Henry Higgins to bring the pearl out of the shell and to give the diamond the setting it deserved. And how!

Drop in at the charming Mlesna Tea Centre at Liberty Plaza, Colombo's swanky shopping arcade, or at the Hilton International for a fragrant adventure.

Browse, sniff samples and yield to a hundred temptations. If you are a connoisseur or just a tea addict it will be a rewarding and memorable experience. If you are looking for tasteful and classy gifts for hard-to-please friends and relatives, you'll find it immensely rewarding.

The exquisite foils and trappings are truly deserving of the contents – for Mlesna only packs the choicest grades -Orange Pekoe, Broken Orange Pekoe famed, regional specialities such as Uva, Nuwara Eliya, Dimbula, Ruhuna, Matale and Kandy – fragrant special blends such as Victorian, Rich Brew, Kandyan Delight and Vintage,

Golden Orange Pekoe and twenty five delectable fruit, spice and flower flavoured teas.

As a price guide the choice Orange Pekoe (which is exclusively used in the re-usable containers) retails at Rs. 35 (app. 70 p, or about US$ 1.15) per hundred grams. The pricing from this base depends on the coptainer you choose, And here the sky seems to be the limit of Mlesna’ s imaginative presentations.

You will be confronted with a delightful range of as many as 115 exclusive packings -porcelain, ceramic, earthenware, tin, mahogany, pinewood, softwood hand-woven reed, soft leather, calico and even solid 22 – carat gold plate. In particular, the Noritake porcelain jars, caddies and pots are exquisite. They come in a range of 10 shapes, beautifully patterned, packed into mahogany chests, fitted into neat racks, set in wooden holders and sometimes embellished with cane handles, and are sure to be treasured and lead a useful life afterwards.

To begin, like Alice in Wonderland, in the beginning, if you are bent on sampling, choose from the wide range of folksy calico bags packed with 50 grams of delicious flavoured tea for as little as Rs. 18 (app. 50 c.) apiece. Pick from a fantastic range that includes mango, kiwi, cardamom, ginger, vanilla, passion fruit, apple, blackberry, peach – apricot, honey, cinnamon, mint, rose, jasmine and that old summer-time favourite of English tea-in-the-garden, Earl Grey fragrant with oil of bergamot.

These flavoured teas are also available in miniature softwood chests at Rs. 36 for 100 grams; an omnibus version of 500 grams in 20 flavours is available in a pinewood gift packing for Rs. 325/-. Pretty porcelain jars packed with 150 grams sell for Rs. 175 and a neat and nifty mahogany rack with 10 porcelain jars cost Rs. 1400/-.

If it is other people you wish to spoil, get into the mainstream of the choice of fancy containers. A mahogany chest very reusable as a jewellery box, containing six exquisite porcelain jars each packed with 150 grams of choicest Orange Pekoe is priced at Rs. 1,800 (less than USS 60).

Two smaller versions cost Rs. 800/- and Rs. 250/-. A pinewood chest with two large porcelain jars costs a very affordable Rs. 375/-. The top shelf in this category are the 22-carat gold plated tea-pots packed with 500 grams of Orange Pekoe costing Rs. 2,250/-.

A sampler of 454 grams of the six famed regional Ceylon flavours can be had in a plain packing for as little as Rs. 66/-(about US$ 2.50); in a mat basket packing for Rs. 77 /- and in a miniature cane picnic box for Rs. 175/-.

An attractive ceramic and earthenware range of pots, jars and caddies is also offered, with prices starting from Rs. 65/- for 100 grams. The traditional favourite, the tin tea caddy is also available in a very attractive range. A glamourous black and gold version packed with 100 grams Orange Pekoe costs a mere Rs. 35/-. And for a real ‘Ceylon’ tea enthusiast, the 100 gram Loolecoondera (Sri I.anka’s first tea estate planted in 1867) caddy at Rs. 28/- will be much appreciated. And for good measure, a very re-usable soft leather Dolly bag tooled in gold, hoarded with 50 grams of Broken Orange Pekoe come in two sizes for Rs. 70/- and Rs. 130/-.
With all this imaginative presentation and uncompromising product quality, Mlesna has not surprisingly, won a host of awards including a Presidential Merit Certificate in 1986. They also exhibit at leading international trade and food fairs in Europe, America and Australia. Mlesna teas, are also available in the leading Colombo hotel shops and in department stores such as Comels, Cargills and Food City.



22 carat gold plated tea-pots, and jars packed with aromatic tea of different flavours. (Suresh de Silva)



Entrance to the Mlesna Tea Centre at the swanky shopping bazaar



Mlesna tea centre has shelves well stocked with a variety of tea packs and containers.