Tea: the Flavour of Cloud-kissed Mountains

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It was the Chinese Emperor Shen Nung, the discoverer of tea in 2,737 B. C., who first gave voice to the praises of this “hot” beverage. So enthralled was he by the fine flavour and soothing sensation of tea that he reported to his subjects: ”Tea gives one vigour of body, contentment of mind and determination of purpose.” Ever since, the praises of tea have been sung by millions of others down the ages, and emperors and philosophers have urged their subjects and fellow men to drink tea instead of any alcohol because, as the Chinese historian Lu Yu wrote in his classic work on tea, Cb’a Ching (8th Century AD.): “It is better to drink such a beverage than wine, which loosens the tongue.” We in Sri Lanka take our tea very seriously. It is to us what wine is to the French. We drink it at all hours of the day and night with milk and sugar or just light brown with sugar. In the villages most rural folk still enjoy sipping the strong, hot liquid unsweetened and then topping it off with a good lick of sugar off the palm of the hand.

What’s more, we Lankans are indeed proud that we produce the world’s best teas in some of

the most stunning locations too. If the good Emperor Shen Nung was around today, he would certainly find a visit to Sri Lanka's tea plantations as invigorating and soothing as sipping the beverage itself. It is a must that every visitor to this island explore "tea land". The trip is not difficult at all because "tea land" can be reached by road or rail; the latter is the more exhilarating, preferably if one can secure a seat on the observation car of the Uda Rata Menike which y leaves the Colombo Fort Railway Station ever morning. As one leaves the heat and humidity of the lowlands and chugs up into the cool hills, one is greeted by some of the world's most spectacular scenes. Tall blue-green mountains, some a mile high, tower into the sky; a blue mist, delicate as a bridal veil, swirls over the peaks while a gentle noon sun induces the clear streams gushing down the mountainsides to sparkle as though they were strewn with diamonds.

Then, all at once the traveller's eyes focus on the most splendid scene of all-the gigantic, velvet-green carpet of tea that seems to have been pulled so neatly over the mountainsides: it is smooth and glistens mildly in the soft light while the fragrance of the world's best teas invades one's 'olfactory senses. heightening this visual treat. The tastebuds, too, clamour for satisfaction and the experience should be topped off with a delicious, hot cuppa.

Collecting the plucked leaves and packing into bags to be transported to the factory.

This then is tea land-mile upon mile of short. closely cropped tea bushes. cloned mm an army of colourful women bent low oYer the bushes with cane baskets on their backs,

carefully picking the tenderest top two leaves and the unopened bud.

Looking upon this scene one gets the impression that tea must have survived here since time began. But the surprising thing is tea is not even indigenous to Sri Lanka and sprang to life here only in the 19th century, thanks to the instinct of a Scotsman and a coffee blight. It all started in 1867, when the Scotsman, James Taylor, planted tea seedlings on some eight hectares of forest land which had been originally cleared for a coffee plantation. His experimental plantation was located on what today is known as the Loolecondera Estate, close to the old hill capital, Kandy. Taylor's instinct proved right when a few years later the fungus that had been destroying the coffee plantations completely wiped them out. Less than a decade later, Taylor had about 40 hectares under cultivation and with the help of planter friends in India started plucking and processing the green tea leaves.

Sri Lanka or Ceylon tea, as it is better known, has come a long way since those days when Taylor brewed his first cuppa and tentatively took the first sips. Today, there are about 223,000 hectares of tea land, and in 1986 Sri Lanka grabbed the top spot as the world's largest tea exporter, shipping out some 211 million kilograms that year. Although tea has been edged out by garment exports as the top foreign exchange earner in the last year or two, it is still one of the country's most important agricultural commodities. Ceylon tea is grown at three distinct elevations and the best comes from Nuwara Eliya at about 6,000 feet. The three elevations are the low growns between sea level and 600 metres, the medium growns between 600 and 1,200 metres and the high growns over 1,200 metres.

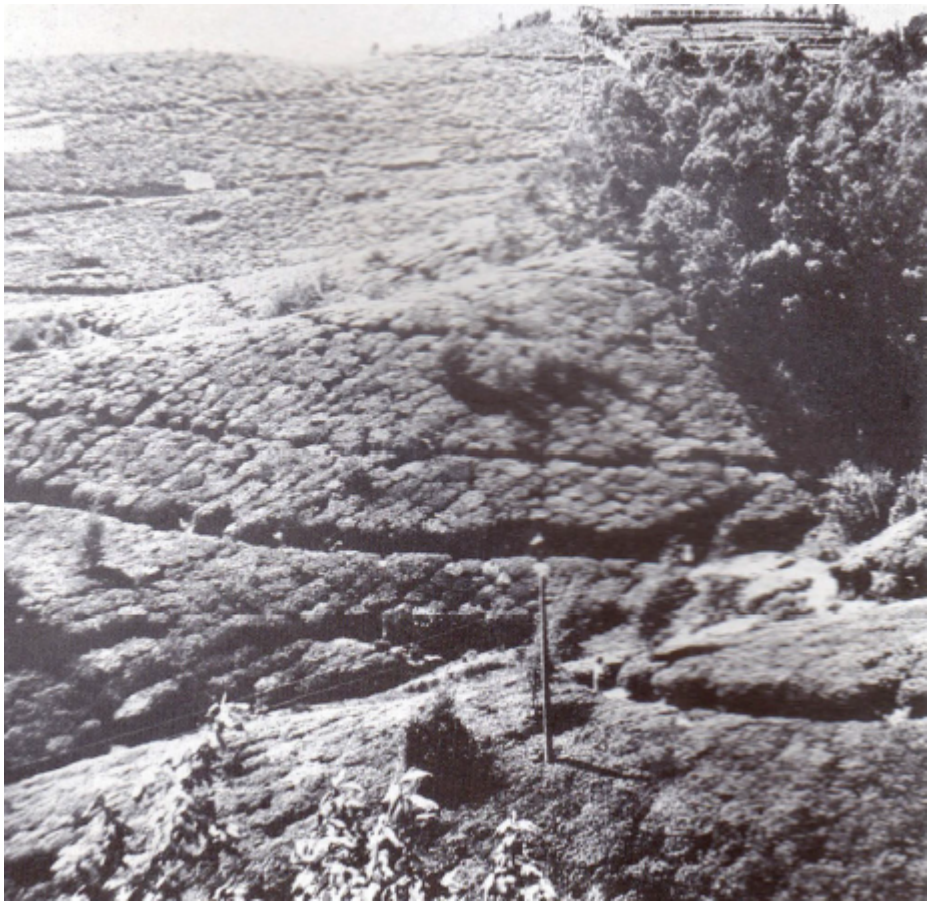
The latter two are subdivided into 'Westerns" and "Easterns", according to the location of the estates. "Like fine wine, fine tea is made under very difficult growing conditions," muses a seasoned tea planter who enjoys both beverages. 'These high mountain tea bushes are equivalent to the famous French vineyards of the Sauternes and struggle on soils just able to sustain hand cultivation. Each elevation and angle of slope , each slight chemical change in the soil affects the taste of the final product," he explained. If cultivation is difficult, then picking is more so. "It takes careful training and an experienced eye to handle this delicate job," he said. An army of women handle the delicate task, capturing the young leaves at their first flush of flavour. The tenderest top two leaves and the unopened bud can be picked every 18 days during the growing season, but the most prized crop is the May and June pick known as the "second flush". A good picker can collect up to 36 kilograms of tea leaves in a day. This may seem unimpressive to the uninitiated but is in fact quite a feat considering that each bush yields but a few grams of leaves. On the higher hill slopes where the best-quality teas flourish, picking is most difficult, the planter said. "Remember, good things come in small quantities," he quipped. Tea leaves are processed in five stages: withering, rolling, fermenting, firing, and sifting or grading. "Withering" takes place on wire or nylon

racks where the leaves are spread and warmed for 24 hours when they become limp and can be “rolled”.

Rolling can be done either by hand or machine. It breaks up the cells and releases the natural juices and enzymes which are the essence of good tea. The freshly rolled leaves are spread on clean tables in a cool humid environment and left to ferment for about three hours in which time the leaves tum a copper colour. This is the crucial stage, because under-fermenting makes the tea bitter, known as “green” in tasters’ jargon, and over-fermenting results in what they call “fruity” and “soft” teas. Drying the leaves in hot-air chambers stops the fermentation and the leaf turns dark brown or black. The leaf is then sorted. Sifting machines vibrate the leaves into various grades. There are two basic categories-whole leaf and broken leaf. Whole leaf grades are: Flowery Orange Pekoe (FOP), Orange Pekoe (OP), Pekoe (P) and Pekoe Souchong (PS). Broken leaf grades fall into “broken”, “fannings” and “dust”. (The word pekoe comes from the Chinese word for leaf and refers not to the kind of leaf but the size of the leaf particles.) Leaf size is certainly f!Ot an indication of tea quality.

Tea-tasters at the numerous broker houses in Colombo give the tea its final stamp of quality. The taster first sifts a sample of dried tea through his fingers to determine the texture. Then he sniffs a sample of brewed tea and fomally slurps it up with a spoon. Taster will inform one that slurping is not just considered polite in tea-tasting societies, but actually a necessity to fully savour the flavour of tea He swishes the tea around his palate and spits it out into a spittoon. Not a bit is swallowed. The tea is then packed in wooden chests lined with aluminium foil and sold at the tea auctions in Colombo from where it is shipped to British housewives and a host of new tea drinkers in the Middle East. Now it is about time to take good Emperor Shen Nung’s advice and have a cuppa that cheers!

A tea taster samples the tea to select the grade.



The vast acres of tea – covered mountains within the factory perched on top.