



If you thought tea is an old fashioned drink, think again. A worldwide campaign is underway to wean the young generation away from bottled soft drinks to the healthier, exotic taste of freshly-brewed, flavoured tea. "If we can attract the young with flavoured tea," said Anselm Perera, one of the brains behind the idea to broaden tea's appeal, "then they will progress to more traditional tea as they get older."

Anselm Perera is the managing director of a company that exports quality tea throughout the world, and of its associate, Mlesna (Ceylon) Ltd, which markets its own brand products both locally and overseas. Mlesna produces 250 different packed items of tea, and spices, for the gourmet tea market, as well as promoting tea as the young drink. Oil extracts are combined with the best quality Ceylon tea to create the company's range of 26 flavoured teas. Cardamom, cinnamon and the expensive ginger oil are locally produced, adding that exotic tang to the younger generation's "cuppa". The range also includes teas with the flavour of mango, mint, strawberry, rose, orange and apple.

For the health-conscious, there is a rare herbal tea called Aeura Lana ta - Polpala which is ideal as a kidney nourisher, reducing fatigue. Also available is Bio Tea, tea grown on an

estate which has not used artificial fertilizer for at least two years.

Traditionally, tea is drunk with milk and sugar but the only way to savour the full flavour of tea is to take it neat, without milk and sugar. The best teas, the equivalent of champagne for the wine drinker, are the high grown orange pekoes from Nuwara Eliya, in the hill country.

Those who prefer their tea strong, with milk, should opt for teas from the Uva district, to the east of Nuwara Eliya. Tea for those who want a brew that is lighter comes from Dimbula.

Ceylon tea that is usually obtainable abroad is blended according to mass market demands. When tea is bought at auction, buyers have in mind their overseas principals' requirements for light or dark, subtle or strong tea in relation to what conditions are like in the country of destination.

Tea that is popular in Australia and New Zealand, where the water is full of sulphates, will not be appreciated in Canada and Switzerland where the water is extra soft. In the U.K., English Breakfast tea is made with highly calcified water and hence the tea should be extra strong to give out its best. The water used for tea can change its character.

In Sri Lanka, pure well water or water from the highlands is best for the perfect cup of tea. If your supply of water is heavily chlorinated, put the water to stand in an open container overnight- for the chlorine to evaporate. Bottled spring water, too, gives you a tea that tastes true.

While you're in Sri Lanka you have a chance to try tea from different districts to see which suits your palate. You can then take your favourite home (up to 3kg of packeted tea can be exported duty-free), or look for the Mlesna range in specialists shops in your own country.

The Mlesna collection of gourmet teas is special, not only because of its quality, but also because of the way it is presented. All the packs of tea are sealed in such a manner that they can be preserved for two years. However if you are buying for local consumption, don't expect the tea's freshness to last that long, due to the high humidity and heat here.

Mlesna teas are packed in a variety of containers including cloth bags, hand-woven reed packs, wooden caddies, carved wooden boxes, hand-made cowhide sachets, porcelain jars and even gold-plated tea pots. Prices range from as little as Rs20 for 50g of pure Ceylon ginger tea in a cloth bag, to Rs2,750 for 200g of high grown orange pekoe tea packed in a 22ct gold-plated tea pot with cup and saucer.

The most popular gift item is a porcelain elephant containing tea. Mlesna also markets tins

of tea from the Loolecondera Estate which is where the tea industry began in 1867. The tea comes from bushes descended from those originally planted by James Taylor, a link with the past for a drink that, thanks to the Mlesna touch, has youth appeal. (R.E.)



Tea: The Young Drink

