The Island Elixir

Posted on



Orange Pekoe Tea

A good strong cuppa is a must for many Sri Lankans to get through the day. Tea is part and parcel of island life, and the trademark beverage 'Ceylon Tea' is sought by connoisseurs across the oceans.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

Since the advent of the tea industry in Sri Lanka over a century and a half ago, Ceylon Tea has risen to find pride of place amongst veterans in the industry. The Island produced tea to this day remains synonymous with quality, earning repute as a 'Symbol of Quality'. From the little boutique shop to five star affluence, tea is an

all pervading beverage in the country.

The Island’s geographical attributes and agro-climatic features have afforded the means to produce distinctly different varieties across seven regions. In turn, this has proven to be the specialty of ‘Ceylon Tea’, catering to versatile preferences of taste.

Ceylon Tea and Geography

Ceylon Tea can be broadly categorised as high-grown tea (above 4000ft elevation), mid-grown tea (2000-4000ft elevations) and low grown tea (below 2000ft elevation). While high-grown refers to the mountainous regions of Nuwara Eliya, Uda Pussellawa, Dimbula and Uva, the mid-grown teas are from the central hills of the Kandy region and the low grown, in Sabaragamuwa and Ruhuna. Incidentally the low grown regions yield strong teas with Ruhuna producing the strongest above all.

The tea produced from the higher altitudes are subject to seasons. Bright sunshine and strong winds that occur in the high altitudes during March through April, in the Dimbula and Nuwara Eliya regions, and July through August, in the Uda Pussellawa and Uva regions are considered quality seasonal teas of fine character. It is believed that during the seasons of strong winds the tea bushes undergo stress and as a result the flowering of the plant is induced and the leaves contain the strongest and finest enzymes. The tea harvested during these periods are regarded to be of superior and seasonal quality. Evidently, morning sunshine and light afternoon showers are ideal weather conditions amenable for tea cultivation. Tea harvested during the wet season give off a somewhat ‘weathery’ character and as a result tea traders are keen to purchase the most lots of tea at the auctions during the seasonal periods and non-rainy seasons.

Across all tea growing regions tea is categorised into different grades. Harvested tea leaves that are withered, rolled, oxidized and dried are then sifted. It is this step that yields the various grades of tea. The bulk tea out of the dryer is a combination of all grades prior to sifting. The leafiest grade is Orange Pekoe (OP), followed by Flowery Orange Pekoe (FOP), Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe (FBOP), Pekoe (PEK), Broken Orange Pekoe 1 (BOP1), Broken Orange Pekoe (BOP), Broken Orange Pekoe Fanning (BOPF) and Dust 1, where the latter grades are the smaller particles of the bulk.

The leaf grade teas or the big leaf teas such as the OP and FBOP grades are best had without milk whereas the BOP, BOPF and Dust 1 are preferred with milk. While the quality and characteristics of tea vary with elevation, the weather and technique of manufacture too affects the quality of tea. The strength of the cup depends on leaf size; bigger the leaf, lighter the cup, smaller the leaf, stronger the cup.

Elite among tippy teas is the Silver Tip tea comprising only of the fine bud and brews a liquor that is even lighter than green tea

The unopened finest buds create a white particle in the process of good tea manufacturing and this is known as the Tip. Tippy teas are those that contain a greater portion of the leaf tip. Considered to be the most preferred grade, these teas are popular in Middle Eastern countries. Elite among these tippy teas is the Silver Tip tea comprising only of the fine bud and brews a liquor that is even lighter than green tea.

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Grades of Tea

Silver Tip—white well twisted whole buds of pleasing appearance with a very mellow light cup.

Orange Pekoe—well twisted long leaf tea with a light liquoring cup.

Flowery Orange Pekoe —well twisted leaf with a slight show of white tip. Light liquoring flavoury cup.

Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe 1 and Flowery Broken Orange Pekoe —well twisted, slightly shorter leaf than OP. The latter grade is the smaller version with a slight show of tip. Flavoury light cup, stronger than the previous grades, OP and FOP.

Flowery Pekoe and Pekoe—curly leaf with a shorter twist. Well made and pleasing to look at. Flowery refers to a slight show of tip. Cup character slightly stronger than FBOP. Flavoury and fragrant.

Broken Orange Pekoe 1—neat twisted leaf. Shorter than FBOP. Pleasing stronger cup character.

Broken Orange Pekoe—broken particles of the previous grades. Short twisted leaf with a stronger cup character.

Broken Orange Pekoe Fannings— smaller particles of a grainy nature. This is the leaf that is sifted out of the leafy grades. Leaves suitable for use in tea bags. Possesses a strong coloury cup with greater astringency.

Dust 1—the smallest grainy particles from the bulk of tea. This grade possess the strongest most coloury cup with the greatest astringency.

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