



Tea Diplomacy

Around the world with tea and friends

When my husband was posted to New Delhi, I started a tea club with twenty fellow-spouses of Ambassadors. By the time we disbanded due to the pandemic in March 2020, we had 65 members representing over 40 countries, and had witnessed 26 presentations of teas and coffees from around the world. Even as the T-Club, as it was called, taught us about traditions, customs and elaborate ceremonies linked to tea, it did what tea does best – it brought us together in friendship and understanding.

Black, white, green, yellow, red, pink ..., fresh, earthy, woody, fruity, flowery, malty, brisk, grassy, nutty – there are so many types of tea! After water, it is the second-most consumed drink in the world. Its rich and well-documented history dates back to 2737 B.C. It began as a medicinal beverage, and today is a way of life in many countries. There is even an International Tea Day on 21st May, in time for the first flush of Darjeeling tea.

At a session on Chinese teas, we tried the rare and precious Pu'er or pu-erh tea, produced in the Yunnan province. This tea gets better and more valuable with age. In ancient times, parents bought Pu'er tea at the birth of a daughter and kept it until her wedding day, when the tea would be sold for her dowry, its value then being equal to gold.

A group of visiting Japanese tea masters were once our guests at the T-club. Did you know that in Japan it takes years to learn how to conduct a proper tea ceremony? Even the way you hold a ladle, matters. We tried our hand at whisking up the unique and healthy matcha tea. Till a few decades ago, a Japanese girl had better marriage prospects after attending a few years of tea school. We learned that simply from the tea served at a business meeting, you can tell if a company is well off or in financial trouble.

In Mongolia, it is an unwritten rule to offer tea to any guest, even uninvited ones, to show the household's hospitality and openness. Besides black tea (with milk and salt), there are teas in Mongolia prepared with fat (butter or lard), dried horse meat, dumplings, barley flour or millet. The spout of a tea kettle should never face the south or the door, because it indicates loss. Traditionally, before drinking tea there would be a tea

oblation, using a flat, carved, wooden spoon to sprinkle tea upwards in a sacrificial offering to the Sun, Sky, deities and nature spirits.

In Russia there is a saying: Take a cup of tea and you'll forget your grief. In the past, tea was so expensive that a box of tea equalled the price of 444 books. It was customary here to drink tea from a saucer, sipped through a sugar cube held between the lips. Traditionally, a strong tea concentrate (zavarka) is prepared in a teapot and hot water added from a samovar when serving.

In Vietnam, the traditional method of preparing tea was to stuff dried green tea into each just-blooming pink lotus flower down at the lotus pond. The flowers would then be picked at dawn, and the tea, now scented by the lotus flowers, extracted. Nowadays, a popular though still complex method is to mix tea with lotus anthers. To make a kilogram of lotus tea, a thousand lotus flowers are needed.

Another wedding-related tea tradition comes from South Korea. Before their wedding, young girls were required to take part in a tea-ceremony class, where they learned how to behave themselves, how to bow, and how to perform the ceremony. Originally, green tea



South Korean Tea Ceremony



was used at the ceremony. Nowadays, in traditional Korean tea houses, ginseng and date tea are more common.

Sri Lanka's Ceylon tea is mainly black tea. The tea region is not big, but due to a large variation in elevation, soil and climate, the teas from different districts such as Uva, Nuwara Eliya or Dimbulla, taste very different. In general, Ceylon teas have a full and bold taste. Ceylon cinnamon tea is a big favourite, perhaps due to the excellent cinnamon grown there.

Steeped in ritual and ceremony, the Moroccan way of drinking tea is all about slowing down. Moroccan mint tea is green tea flavoured with lots of fresh mint and heavily sweetened. It is always served to guests, at homes or in shops. In the south, mint tea is served thrice, first strong and bitter, then medium-strong, lastly weak and very sweet. Mint tea is drunk to calm down, chill out, look at the world, debate and connect. Tea can be masculine, accompanied by loads of sugar and a beautiful demonstration by men to show their skill at making it. Or it can be feminine, with less sugar; part of the ritual of the Moroccan hammam.

In Azerbaijan, tea is always served when a boy's family visits a girl's home to ask her hand in marriage. If the

girl and her family agree to the match, the future bride serves the tea with sugar. This means that preparations for the wedding can begin. But if she serves the tea without sugar, it spells a brush-off. Azerbaijanis favour a strong black tea, scented with an infusion of herbs and flowers. It is drunk with lemon and white or black cherry jam. Azerbaijani men love to go to tea-houses. They discuss politics and social issues and exchange gossip and manly advice over glasses of tea.

Tea in pink? Yes, it does exist. Noon chai or sheer chai (from the Persian, meaning 'milk tea') is a traditional



Noon chai



Kashmiri Kahwa

Photo: Poonam Bachhav

beverage in Kashmir, a winter drink made with salt, milk and baking soda. The addition of air with baking soda gives the tea its unique colour.

Another famous Kashmiri tea is, of course, Kahwa. The secret to Kahwa is the exotic spice mix. Dry roast cinnamon bark, cloves, black cardamom and a tiny little black pepper (or optionally Kashmiri roses) give it a wonderful fragrance.

Though technically not a tea, in spirit, Yerba Mate or 'the drink of friendship', is the tea of Argentina, Uruguay



Yerb Mate

and Paraguay. It is made from *Ilex paraguariensis*, a special plant with high levels of caffeine. The people of Uruguay drink the most yerba mate in the world; a typical Uruguayan always has a thermos of yerba mate in hand, even when walking or cycling. When serving yerba in a group of friends or family, the host will pour hot water, refilling the same yerba mate about ten times, the drink is passed around and everyone shares a bombilla (a kind of straw). If you want more, don't say thank you, because that means you are done.

Though prepared in lots of different ways, using various rituals or ceremonies, all tea basically comes from different varieties of the same plant, *Camellia sinensis* – a small evergreen shrub whose leaves are used to produce it. Just like the human race! For me, tea will always stand for friendship, goodwill, acceptance, and inclusion. [YT](#)

Annamaria Somogyi

Wife of the former Hungarian Ambassador to India, Annamaria Somogyi started the T-Club in India in 2017.



Vietnamese lotus tea