

Discovering the wide world of *Tea*



Photo: Deutsches Feeburo

Apart from water, tea is the most widely drunk liquid in the world. It has a long history, full of legends and customs. At first, in China, it was taken for its medicinal qualities, then by the 3rd century it had become an everyday drink. But it wasn't until 500 years later that the master, Lu Yu, wrote down everything that anyone needs to know on the subject. Even today, his "Chaking" is the bible of tea.

Lu Yu has a spiritual descendant and he lives in the French-speaking part of Switzerland! Denis Braunschweig, owner of the T Fine Tea Trading Company in Gland, has an enormous knowledge of the subject, reinforced by years of travelling. He gets real pleasure from sharing his passion with all those who have a genuine interest in tea.

Back in the 8th century, the "classic" age of tea, it was generally produced in compressed bricks that were crumbled and boiled in salt water, sometimes with added ginger or even onion. In fact, in those days tea was more like

a broth! Then in the "Romantic" period of the Song dynasty (960-1279), tea leaves were crushed to a fine powder that was whipped up in hot water with a little bamboo stick.

Then in 1368 the first Emperor of the Ming dynasty gave tea an importance that it had never previously enjoyed. This may have been for military reasons: tea could be exchanged for horses! It was produced in great quantities but quality was also critical. The long, complicated processes were dropped; after picking, the leaves were simply roasted and immersed in boiling water. This method, which is virtually unchanged today, allows the tea to retain all its perfume and its health properties.

In Japan, tea was introduced at much the same time as Buddhism and developed a spiritual dimension to do with bringing man closer to nature. A set of rules for drinking tea was established that were the birth of their famous tea ceremony.

It was much later that tea started to make its

appearance in Europe. The Dutch set up the first East India company in 1602 and started shipping back the new sensation. It received a particularly warm welcome in England which today is the second largest consumer of tea in the world. Doctors believed it was an aid to digestion, and it was soon helping to alleviate the excesses of the Royal Court. In just a few decades, tea became a symbol of the good life in England.

Tea is a variety of the magnificent camelia. It comes from *Thea (camelia) sinensis* and is very widespread around the world. However, it is hardly grown at all in Europe which is surprising since it can withstand both snow and tropical climates, and does well at a wide range of altitudes.

Growing high-quality tea involves several complicated processes and requires a good deal of expertise. The picking is critical; tea can be divided into four classes, according to the number of leaves that are picked in addition to the valuable end bud (the pekoe.) "Imperial"

tea only contains the bud itself while "common" tea accepts up to the fifth leaf away from the bud.

After picking, it's time for the most important process — treating the leaves. The same leaf can be used to make black tea or green tea. There are four principal kinds of tea:

WHITE TEA

This is very rare and reserved for wealthy connoisseurs. It gets its name from the delicate white fluff on its leaves. After picking, the leaves are only dried in the open air. This category of tea includes one of the rarest varieties in the world, Silver Needle tea, which is only picked on two days each year.

GREEN TEA

Green tea comes mostly from the Far East. In Japan the leaves are steam-heated to avoid fermentation, then twisted. In China the principle is the same although the traditional method takes longer. However, the grading system is different. In China, it depends on how the leaves are twisted and in Japan on the plants' exposure to the sun.

SEMI-FERMENTED TEA

A kind of compromise between green and black tea, it is also called "Blue-green tea." It comes essentially from China but also from Taiwan where it is fermented longer and is known as "Black Dragon tea." It is unusual in that its leaves are never crushed.

BLACK TEA

Although it originated in China, surprisingly little is drunk there and it accounts for only 20% of the country's production. However, it is the favourite tea of the British who are fond of adding bergamote (Earl Grey.) It is mostly produced in ex-British colonies such as India, Sri Lanka and parts of Africa. Producing black tea requires a great deal of time and attention from the teamaker; here's a summary of what is done to the leaf between the bush and the cup.



Photo Deutsches Teebüro

First the leaves are softened to lose 40% of their water so they can be more easily twisted to extract essential oils and juice. If the leaf is broken too much at this point, the strength of the tea dominates the subtlety of its perfume. Next it is fermented, and here the teamaker has to decide when to stop the fermentation and start drying. After drying, the tea is sorted into grades, depending on the size and quality of the leaves.

But if you think it's all over at this point, you're quite wrong. Now it's time to choose which black tea to drink. The classification system is a nightmare for the uninitiated. First there are three principal categories: tea whose leaves are whole, broken or crushed. This affects the strength of the tea; the more the leaves are crushed, the faster they release their strongest aroma.

Each of these three categories is further divided into different grades. Fortunately Denis Braunschweig has a series of simple words to explain the difference between, say, a Marybong FTGFOP 1 Darjeeling Second Flush and a Khongea STGFOP 1 Assam.

Finally, to provide a little more variety, the teas come in different blends which can also be flavoured with fruit or spices.

The simple word "tea" covers an enormous choice of taste sensations but its secret weapon.

Without doubt, is its huge number of medicinal properties. For thousands of years, tea has been used as a remedy for all kinds of complaints and today even more uses are being claimed, ranging from improving intelligence to reinforcing sexual potency! Whatever the truth about that, doctors do credit tea with lowering cholesterol, improving blood circulation and reducing the risk of cancer. It is also considered effective as an anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant, and good for rheumatism. Our ancient ancestors were right! It is now certain that tea leaves contain many oligo-elements of vitamins and mineral salts, as well as fluoride which fights tooth decay. And it's true that green tea does burn fat. So what more do you want? There's no reason not to drink tea, quite the contrary. Except, perhaps, that once you get the taste for it... well, ask Mr Braunschweig.

To visit:

- The T Fine Tea Trading Company where Denis Braunschweig offers an unbelievable choice of varieties and infusions as well as the equipment for preparing them properly. But best of all in this shop is the enthusiasm that shines in the owner's eyes when he starts to tell you a story about tea.

To read:

- Another tea victim, Jean-Marie Mauler is a lawyer who has also been captivated by the leaf. His passion has produced a magnificent book "The Handbook of Tea" published by Nicolas Junod. A real journey to the heart of the world of tea, this is a very well planned book, fun to read and full of historical anecdotes. Available in bookshops and at Denis Braunschweig's boutique. Indispensable.