

BOOK REVIEW
Book “Tea for the 21st Century”
authored by Ian Bersten, PhT

The Dutch East India Company took tea from Japan to Europe in 1670 and started promoting Chinese black tea, soon after. The first batch of tea must have been presented to the Royal family, the ‘House of Orange’ and by a stroke of marketing genius, it was promoted as ‘Orange Pekoe’ to suggest Royal Warrant. The word ‘Pekoe’, which in the Chinese language actually means pubescent bud, came to designate quality.

Sugar was in the vanguard of the hot beverages revolution of the 18th century and helped move tea, coffee and cocoa from upper class exclusivity to the labour class. The fully fermented Indian and Ceylon teas were suited to addition of milk and sugar. Chapter 1 goes on to describe how tea plantations were established in Assam (with local ‘jat’) and Darjeeling (with China variety being more suitable). Machine processing was developed in India as opposed to hand-rolling in China.

In course of time, Indian tea became more popular because of stronger flavour and colour, cheap price and greater cuppage. Chinese tea spread to Europe and Russia, which did not use milk and sugar. Indian tea trade developed rapidly with British investment as also in Ceylon. The U.S. market was also mainly for Chinese tea.

Tea bags became available everywhere, in the 1950s.

Chapter 2 narrates how tea was commercialized. It covers the transformation from loose tea and packet tea straight from the garden to tea pot, supermarkets and reduced personal service to single serve including jam and butter. ‘Tasting Room’ procedures are covered in Chapter 3, especially brewing for 3 to 5 minutes. Traditions of the West are detailed in Chapter 4 as also how to brew tea. Similarly Chapters 5 to 8 go into greater details of brewing.

Chapter 9 describes how the structure of the leaf affects brewing. This is an interesting chapter, where the difference between steeping and leaching is explained. Leaching using a filter extracts more flavour than steeping. If the leaf is ground, the same quantity of leaf gives much more flavour than large leaf tea irrespective of how long the large leaf is brewed. Bitterness from tannin and over-brewing can be recognized on the back of the tongue.

Chapter 10 gives clues to better brewing. Smaller grade tea yields a quicker infusion. ‘Fan-nings’ and ‘Dusts’ are more convenient, but give less flavour, but the author contradicts himself by saying that the public probably found it easier to use larger BOP because the leaves would not pass through the built-in strainer holes in the spouts of tea pots and also, could be used in myriad filter devices.

Chapter 11 guides the reader on how to buy tea. Vacuum pack from the country of origin retains the freshness of the tea and make sure the tea you buy is recently manufactured. Your choice depends on how you like your tea, green or black, strong or weak, with or without milk and sugar, etc. Chapter 12 highlights the uses of various brewer devices and different types of filters, tea eggs, tea balls and closed tea filters which are described and illustrated. The tea cosy is used to ensure that the second cup of tea remains hot, when served.

Chapter 13 describes how Chinese tea is evaluated : shape (make and style) 30%, colour 10%, aroma 25%, taste 25% and used tea leaves (infusion) 10%. In the western approach, liquor is more important; the intrinsic quality of tea – a cup of tea is a cup of tea. In China, the extrinsic quality of tea is equally important as it is an experience, performance or ceremony. In the Chinese style of brewing, the first pot is discarded (as too strong !) and the same leaves are used several times for topping up.

In Chapter 14, Chinese tea is looked at through western eyes. Chinese tea is normally sold on 'romance'; brewing and drinking it is an experience to be savoured. That 'Tea as a religion' is brought out in Chapter 15; what is highlighted is how the brew is worshipped and a state of 'nirvana' is achieved by its priests and acolytes. Images of vast fields of tea have a calming effect and the 'rites and wrongs' of tea are detailed. In other words, there are two distinct cultures viz. 'Eastern Green Tea religion' and 'Indian/Ceylon/Kenyan Black Tea religion'. In the final Chapter, health aspects of tea as a beverage are described, mainly the importance of caffeine and anti-oxidants.

This book could be considered a treatise on the art of brewing tea and would appeal to any professional in tea trade or to a tea connoisseur on choosing the type of tea to suit his needs and to get the best out of the tea by adopting the right method of brewing it. It would be a welcome addition to the library of anyone seriously interested in the consumption of tea as a daily beverage.

Reviewed by
Dr. V. Ramaswamy