

## The History Of Darjeeling In India

### What is the history of Darjeeling tea?

The history of Darjeeling tea in India is fascinating. Most fascinating is the fact that but for a small turn of fate, its entire history may have never happened. That's not to indicate that Darjeeling's existence is based on an accident—it was actually the result of an experiment.

In 1841, a civil surgeon working for the Indian Medical Service named Dr. Campbell, recently transferred to Darjeeling, decided to see what would happen if he planted seeds of the *Camellia Sinensis* of China in the soil of India.

At this point in history, tea was nothing new to India—the sister plant of *Sinensis*, *Camellia Assamica*, is native to India and had been cultivated there for both medicinal and recreational purposes for thousands of years. However, this was the first time anyone had attempted the transplantation of a plant indigenous to China.

The results of Campbell's experiment speak for themselves. Today, Darjeeling tea is among the world's most sought after teas, inimitable in both standard and reputation.

## The Darjeeling Taste Test

### What are the different types of Darjeeling tea?

Tea production and exportation is an engine driving the economy of the Darjeeling province, second only to the tourism industry. This, being that Darjeeling is a tourist destination, says an awful lot about its quality.

Darjeeling tea has traditionally been classified as black tea. Although exploration into the production of other tea types such as green and oolong have occurred, mainly resulting in mixed and disappointing results.

Darjeeling teas can come in five varieties, each variety dependent on the season in which it's harvested.

- **First Flush:** Highly prized for being intensely floral and aromatic
- **Second Flush:** Exposed to warmer temperatures; the resulting brew is more mature, producing the signature muscatel flavor
- **Autumn Flush:** Although less spicy or flavorful, the resulting tea produces a more full-bodied, darker brew appreciated by many
- **In-Between Flush:** Typically results in combination of the character traits of the first two flushes
- **Monsoon Flush:** The resulting product is more oxidized. As a result, it's infrequently exported and more often used for chai tea

## **First Flush Vs. Second Flush**

### **What is First Flush and Second Flush?**

To the uninitiated, the terms “first flush” and “second flush” in reference to a beverage may not sound appetizing. But to Darjeeling tea drinkers, those terms connote a fine cup of India’s prized tea.

First flush is simply a term used to reference the first harvest of the year. Likewise, second flush refers to the year’s second harvest. Tea experts revere both harvest periods for producing the finest quality Darjeeling tea. The first flush begins in early to mid-March when, after a period of winter dormancy, the plants begin to bud.

The second flush typically begins in June, and usually produces a crop that’s sweet and smooth in flavor. The differences in quality are attributed to varying environmental factors: first flush tea obtains its flavor as a result of growing in the cold early spring air, while simultaneously exposed to intense sun. Second Flush obtains its unique flavor through exposure to warmer temperatures.

## **Autumn Flush And Everything After**

### **What are the other flush periods of Darjeeling tea?**

There are other times throughout the year when Darjeeling tea is harvested. However, the resulting crops are typically not as flavorful, appreciated, or marketable as the first or second flushes. This is in large part due to the heavy amount of rainfall and lack of direct sunlight that precipitates these harvesting periods. Since tea leaves need a good balance of rainfall and sunlight to prosper, the overabundance of the former and the lack of the latter tend to result in a washing away of the signature Darjeeling taste.

The least underappreciated, and seemingly the least affected by these environmental conditions, is the autumn flush, a harvest period that lasts from October to November.

True to its namesake, the in-between flush is harvested between the first two flush periods, typically beginning four to six weeks after the first flush has commenced.

The monsoon flush takes place during the rainy season between the second and autumn flushes, and tends to yield the least flavorful of Darjeeling teas.

## **Other Indian Teas**

### **What other teas are produced in India?**

Darjeeling tea, while widely considered “the champagne of teas” and “the queen of Indian teas,” may be the best tea produced in India, but it is certainly not the only tea produced there.

Assam tea is grown in northeastern India and harvested from the indigenous *Camellia Assamica* plant. Comprising the majority all manufactured Indian tea, tea drinkers know Assam for its richness and full-bodied, often malty flavor. While Assam teas are typically grown at or near sea level, a variation from this practice results in Kopili tea. This tea grows in higher elevation near the Himalayan foothills. The combination of climate, soil, and elevation gives Kopili its unique, inimitable taste.

On the other side of the country, in the southern portion of the Western Ghats mountain region, the growth and production of Nilgiri tea takes place. Nilgiri tea, which translates directly to “blue mountain tea,” boasts a dark and intensely fragrant flavor.

## **Darjeeling Care And Proper Plucking**

### **How and when are Darjeeling tea leaves plucked?**

Those who pluck the leaves from the *Sinensis* plants in the Darjeeling region may not realize it, but their skill is vital for tea drinkers to enjoy a cup of some of the world’s greatest tea. In fact, some might say that there is an art to the proper plucking of tea leaves, in particular Darjeeling tea leaves.

The work of the tea plucker begins in the early morning, often under cover of rain and mist. The terrain is tough to manage, given the tea plant’s mountainous surroundings. As the fine flavor of Darjeeling tea is as result of a plucking standard that serves to separate the buds more suited to the palates of the Sultans, the pluckers hand select and pick off the smallest shoots, handling them with the gentle care learned from centuries of repetition. This is no easy task and involves a keen eye and savvy hand.

To the lovers and appreciators of Darjeeling tea, the tea plucker’s dedicated labor and artistic touch should never be discounted or taken for granted.

## **Processing Darjeeling**

### **How is Darjeeling tea processed?**

Darjeeling tea leaves are processed in a traditional method, a gentle treatment necessary for the taste and quality of the final product.

During the withering process, the freshly plucked tea leaves endure blasts of hot and cold air, slowly draining the leaf of moisture. This lengthy process takes approximately 16 hours.

Rolling occurs next. Once the leaves are withered, they’re loaded into mechanical rollers and twisted into a uniform shape in preparation for the next step, fermentation.

This process takes anywhere from two to four hours, and is performed by exposing the rolled leaves to humidity. This is where the signature aroma develops.

Once the leaves are fermented, one of the most important stages, the firing (or drying) stage, commences. Here, the leaves are exposed to varying stages of hot temperatures for about 30 minutes. By the time the firing is complete, leaf takes on its dark color.

The final step is the sorting and packing stage, where the tea is sifted through, graded according to size and darkness, and packed. Teas continue to mature with the passage of time. For that reason, storage conditions are often dry and well ventilated.

## **Chai Tea**

### **What is Chai tea?**

Chai tea is something of a redundancy; “chai” is the word that most of the world uses for what we call tea. So in effect, saying chai tea is the literal equivalent of saying “tea tea.” For all practical purposes however, the definition of the western world’s version of chai tea is described by masala chai tea.

Chai tea is essentially a method of making tea, as opposed to a style of tea in its own right. Chai tea incorporates a combination of black tea, milk, sugar, and a bevy of spices into its recipe. Most commonly, these spices include, but are not limited to, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, and pepper. The tea is blended with milk and honey and results in a deliciously sweet, spicy, creamy drink.

Chai teas are becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to coffee and traditional tea in North America, having gradually evolved from the flavorful, exotic drink of its ancestors into a replacement for the high-brow coffee creations of most specialty coffee shops.

## **Chai Tea Health Benefits**

### **What are the health benefits of Chai tea?**

It’s generally believed that tea has many beneficial properties that can have a positive impact on the body’s overall health. It would stand to reason that since chai tea uses black tea as its base, the same health benefits would apply. However, the ingredients that differentiate chai tea may prove to be additionally beneficial. Spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper and cardamom, which are typical to chai tea, all have claimed medicinal properties.

Cardamom, used as a perfume by Greeks and Romans and chewed as a breath freshener by the denizens of ancient Egypt, is said to improve digestion and

metabolism. It's also been said to affect everything from depression to certain types of oral disorders.

Cinnamon and cloves, which combined may combat a number of infirmities like high blood pressure, flu, colds, fever, gas, heartburn, and indigestion, have both been ranked by the USDA as containing high amounts of antioxidants.

Another ingredient of chai tea and high in antioxidants, pepper has long been used to improve the body's digestion.

## **Nepalese Tea**

### **What is Nepalese tea?**

Nepalese tea, or Nepal/Nepali tea, shares many of Darjeeling tea's characteristics. In fact, the two are so similar in taste, aroma, and quality, many confuse Nepalese tea for Darjeeling tea. Adding to the puzzlement is the geographic proximity between Darjeeling and the tea growing regions of Nepal.

Nepalese tea does not share the high profile of its famous cousin for one major reason; Nepal has never produced enough tea to function as a major exporter. Only recently have yields increased to the point where Nepalese tea is readily available outside of Nepal. Moreover, those lucky enough to experience Nepalese tea describe a brew similar to Darjeeling tea in character in appearance, rich in taste, aroma, and color.

Nepalese tea is grown at high altitudes, often above 3,000 feet. It is harvested at various times during the year in different flushes, just like Darjeeling tea. Those flushes include the first flush, second flush, monsoon flush, and autumn flush.