

Tea For 6.7 Billion: The Tea Cultures Of The World

What are the different tea cultures of the world?

Tea is the second most widely-consumed beverage in the world, and those eager to declare coffee the first need only be reminded of the primary component of both. Additionally, those who would label tea as a drink common only to the Oriental cultures of the world might stand to take a closer look at just how vast and influential the practice of drinking tea is all over the world.

Just a cursory peek into any history textbook is a reminder that, as recently as two centuries ago, tea was one of the most frequently imported and heavily consumed products in America. It was only an issue of politics that eventually led the then-burgeoning American culture down the dark (and arguably, less healthy) path to coffee consumption.

Countries as varied in culture and location as Russia, Morocco, Sri Lanka and India each have a deep-rooted tea culture, and often the method of its preparation and significance is as varied as the customs and languages of its people. Not only known for its apparent restorative properties and health benefits, tea is a beverage that can be many things to many people: it is both refreshment and ritual, a symbol of social status and an offering of friendship.

Teaware Around The World

What are the different types of teaware available?

Teaware can range in style from elegant to kitsch with prices running an equal gamut. While the availability of teaware is limited only to an individual's proximity to the nearest shopping center, it's important to understand that the representations put forth in the "china 'n stuff" corner of your local supermarket only embody a small portion of the components that actually make up the whole of traditional teaware.

Since the traditional manner of brewing tea is done so by placing the leaves directly in hot water, one of the essential components of teaware is the tea strainer, which is used to prevent loose tea leaves from traveling into the drinker's cup when poured.

Tea infusers (also known as a teaballs or tea eggs) are small filter-like vessels that filter the tea leaves from the water when brewing loose-leaf tea.

The more serious-minded of tea drinkers can invest in draining trays (or tea seas), an item that is an essential part of the Gofu Tea Ceremony of China. Its purpose is to act as a filter that allows for the washing away of excess water and waste during this rather prolonged, untidy tea-making method. Similar to coffee jars, tea caddies are used to store and maintain the freshness of unused tea.

All The Little Teapots -- Not Necessarily Short And Stout

Are all teapots made the same?

The history of the teapot goes far back. While their origin is a matter of dispute (some claim that since the original method of drinking tea in China was to pour boiling water directly onto tea leaves in a cup, the teapot was more likely a European creation), there is no doubt that teapots are a staple of world tea culture for their practical purposes as well as their aesthetic value.

In Russian tea culture, a metal container called a samovar has served as that nation's own personalized teapot since the mid-1700s. Literally translated to mean "self-boiler," the samovar comes in different shapes, sizes, and designs. They are valued as much for their artistic design as for their practical use.

The monetary value of certain teapots depends on the manner of their construction as well as whether they are porcelain, steel, cast iron or glass. Some teapots fetch unfathomable fortunes. A private collector purchased a rare pair of coral-ground teapots, dating to the era of China's Qianlong Emperor, for \$1.2 million, making them the most expensive teapots in history.

Pour It Again, Sam: The Moroccan Tea Ceremony

What is the tea culture of Morocco?

Let's face it, nobody ever imagined Humphrey Bogart tugging at a glass of mint green tea in Casablanca, but given the fact that Morocco is one of the world's first importers of tea, the probability is great that in the fictional world of Rick's Café American, mint green tea would have been a house staple.

Moroccans perform their tea ceremony, seen as a display of friendship and hospitality, with reverence and artistic delivery. Unlike meal preparation, which Moroccan women take care of, the male head of the family carries out tea preparation and serving. A tip for the wise: if you should find yourself in a Moroccan household being offered a cup of carefully prepared Morocco mint tea, drink up. Moroccans consider refusal impolite and tantamount to offense.

Guests of the Moroccan tea ceremony can expect to be treated to an intricate ritual that offers a blend of fresh mint leaves, hard sugar cones, and gunpowder green tea. After the tea has been carefully prepared and served, additional ingredients like orange flower, pine nuts, and lemon grass may be added.

Russian Tea Culture

What is the tea culture of Russia?

Tea is enduring, a beverage that not only has the capacity to survive generations, but it has also sustained itself through cultural and political upheaval. And, while it's doubtful that the preeminence of tea in Russia will ever be seen as a contributing factor to the fall of communism, the fact that it has remained a mainstay of daily Russian culture through it all says much about its enduring qualities.

The roots of Russian tea culture date back to 1638 and the donation of 120 pounds of tea to the Russian czar by Mongolia. However, it wasn't until the late 1700s that tea was made available to anyone beyond the wealthy and royally-connected. The most commonly consumed Russian tea is black tea. The most popular blend is called Russian Caravan, a blend of oolong, keemun, and lapsang souchong. Russian Caravan got its name from the very camel caravans that used to import it from tea-producing countries, a 6,000-mile journey that once took a year and a half to complete.

In Russia today, tea is taken with all meals and drunk throughout the day as a stand-alone beverage. This is no doubt in part due to Russia's cool climate, which lends itself to the permanence of the essential warm drink.

Russian Tea Recipe

What is the recipe for Russian tea?

Although increasingly more difficult to find in today's culture of instant gratification, there are recipes for authentic Russian tea that do not call for instant powdered tea. The following recipe serves an intimate gathering of 20 guests.

Ingredients:

- 5 whole cloves
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 3 quarts water
- 3 tea bags
- 2 cups orange juice
- ½ cup lemon juice
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 2 ½ cups pineapple juice

Directions: Bring 3 quarts water to a boil. Add cloves, cinnamon sticks, and tea bags and steep 5 minutes. Add orange juice, lemon juice, pineapple juice and sugar and simmer 15 minutes. Remove the spices and serve.

Sri Lanka Tea: Late Bloomers

What is the tea culture of Sri Lanka?

As far as international tea culture goes, the nation of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) might be considered a late bloomer. The tea production industry was only introduced in the latter half of the 1800s. In that time though, Sri Lanka has made up for lost time by becoming one of the world's largest producers.

In addition to its voluminous output, Sri Lanka is also renowned for the quality of its tea. Ceylon black tea and its crisp, citrusy aroma, is the specialty of Sri Lanka tea growers.

Being a major tea exporter means Sri Lankans have developed a unique tea culture. Sri Lankans enjoy their tea with milk and sugar, just like the English, with one exception: milk is always warmed separately.

In addition to their prowess at exporting a mean black tea, Sri Lanka is also a minor producer of Ceylon green teas, which are reported to be an acquired taste for those already versed in the ways of all teas green.

Indian Tea Culture

What is the tea culture of India?

The history of tea in India is long and ever-evolving. Grown indigenously and used throughout most of its history for its claimed medicinal properties, Indians did not recognize tea as a recreational drink until the 19th century when the British introduced the practice. Since that initial introduction, India has progressed leaps and bounds in the ways of tea culture, becoming the world's largest producer of tea until very recently, when China assumed the title.

Still, India maintains an important niche in the market of world teas. One of the most popular teas in the world, Darjeeling (which enthusiasts refer to as "the champagne of teas") is grown exclusively in its namesake region of northern India, high up in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Traditionally classified as a black tea that produces a light-colored, thin-bodied appearance with a distinctly musky taste, modern Darjeeling tea can also be processed as a green and oolong tea. Indians drink tea primarily as a breakfast and evening drink typically enjoyed with milk and sugar.

Beyond The Japanese Tea Ceremony

What is the Japanese tea culture?

The most well-known tea culture tea custom has to be the Japanese tea ceremony. Although its practice has been employed for over a thousand years, the deliberate precision with which it's still carried out remains an important part of the country's proud culture.

Green is the traditional choice of tea for the ceremony (specifically, a finely-powdered green tea called matcha) as it is for a majority of the nation.

Though Japanese culture has undergone a gradual westernization, tea is still the ubiquitous beverage of choice for its citizens, and the Japanese tea ceremony continues to survive the challenges and constant change of modern society through the continued teaching of this timeless ritual. Today, classes are offered and school clubs formed from the junior high to university level, offering younger generations an opportunity to become versed in the tradition.

Second to green tea in popularity is oolong tea. The Japanese also enjoy black tea most often served with milk or lemon.

Chinese Tea Culture

What is the tea culture of China?

The history of Chinese tea culture dates back thousands of years to the 10th century BC, and its influence has spread to every corner of the globe. The very custom of offering a cup of tea to guests, a practice shared by tea cultures worldwide, has its roots in China where legend purports that the philosopher Laozi was inspired to write the Tao Te Ching after a stranger invited him for tea and conversation. Due to the Tao Te Ching's influence on Chinese culture, the offering of tea to guests soon became a national custom.

There are literally hundreds of varieties of Chinese tea with the most commonly consumed type being gunpowder green tea. The tea gets its name because the leaves are rolled into small balls that look like gunpowder pellets.

Other popular Chinese teas include white tea, which experts believe has beneficial medicinal properties for the stomach, and black tea, recently believed to combat cardiovascular disease.

Oolong tea is the most commonly served tea in Chinese restaurants, partly due to its middle-of-the-road appeal, being somewhere between green and black tea in oxidation and taste.