

TIME FOR TEA

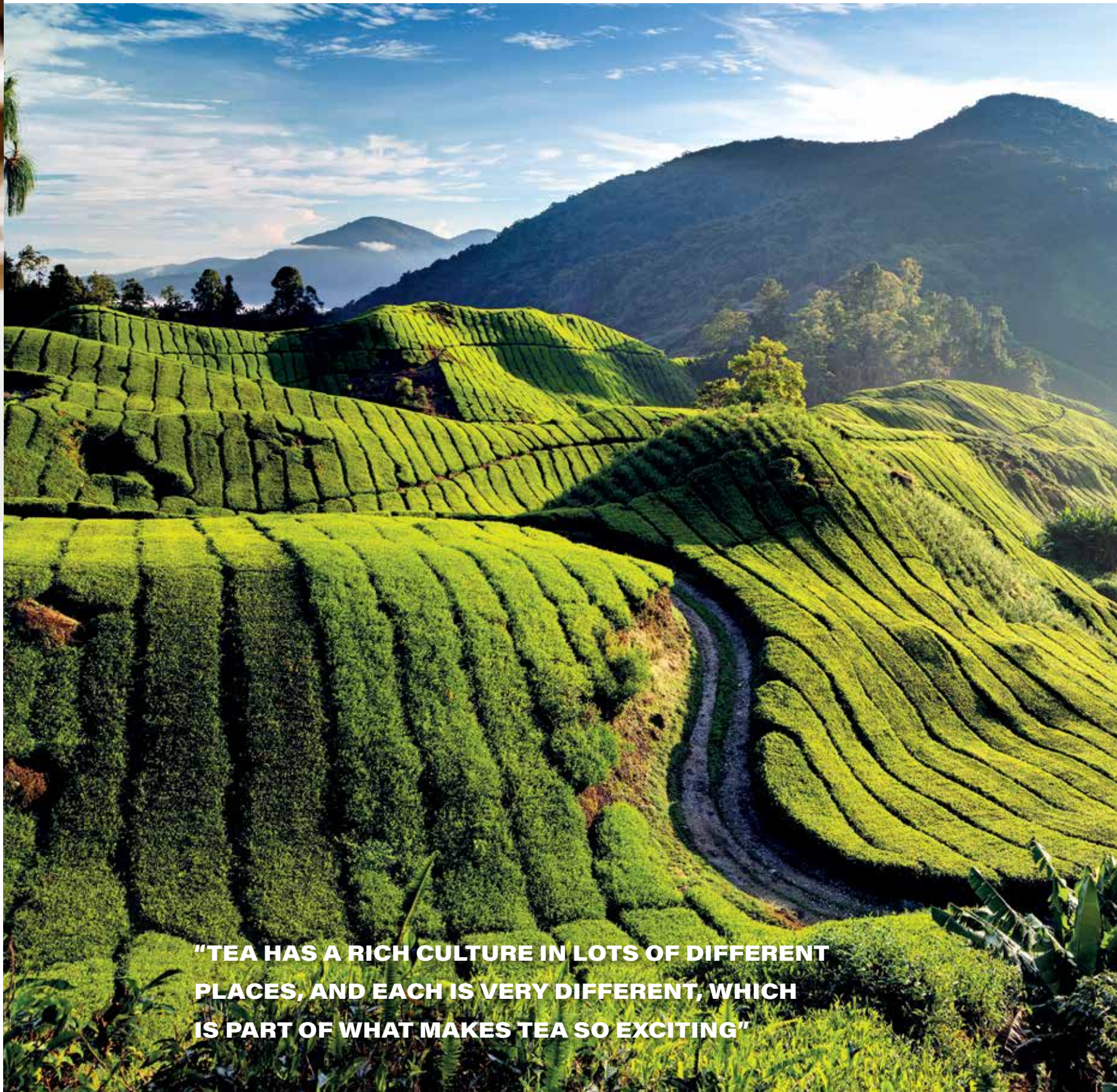
LOVED AND APPRECIATED WORLDWIDE, TEA IN ITS MANY FORMS IS BEING REINVENTED FOR A NEW GENERATION OF CONNOISSEURS

BY KATY SALTER





Previous page: Chinese afternoon tea. This page, left to right: The serenity of the Japanese tea ceremony; Moroccan tea glasses; tea plantations in Malaysia



“TEA HAS A RICH CULTURE IN LOTS OF DIFFERENT PLACES, AND EACH IS VERY DIFFERENT, WHICH IS PART OF WHAT MAKES TEA SO EXCITING”

4CORNERS

Standing waist-high in tea bushes in Kenya, it hits me: I know nothing about tea. How can this be? I'm a Brit: tea is in my DNA. Despite drinking three cups a day, like most people, I've never given much thought to how the drink is produced. On assignment in Kenya, I had the opportunity to find out: picking *Camellia sinensis*, then visiting the factories where those leaves judder along conveyor belts to be withered, dried, and turned into the drink we know and love.

Tea keeps the world turning. Whether it is at Moroccan bazaars or Manhattan tea bars, Japanese tea gardens or Indian street stalls, millions of us punctuate the daily routine with a cup. Tea is the most popular drink in the world after water, yet in recent years, it has been overshadowed by coffee.

Now it is tea's turn in the spotlight once more. Interest in loose-leaf and single-estate teas is growing; tea bars are giving coffee shops a run for their money; and tea lovers are experimenting with similar trends to the coffee crowd, such as nitro tea and cocktails. "It's an exciting time to begin your tea journey," says Tony Gebely, founder of the award-winning World of Tea website, and author of *Tea: A User's Guide* (Eggs and Toast Media LLC, November 2016). As I discovered in Kenya, the world of tea is a complex and fascinating one.

"Tea has a rich culture in lots of different places, and each is very different, which is part of what makes tea so exciting," says Emilie Holmes, founder of Good & Proper Tea, a U.K. brewer and trader. "In Japan, they have tea ceremonies, which are almost a meditation. It takes years to train to be a host: they treat tea with the utmost respect. Similarly, in China,

there's a lot of ritual and calm around brewing tea. It's very well respected." Meanwhile, in Morocco or India, tea is woven into the hectic day: in India, *chai wallahs* serve fragrant black tea from street stalls; in Morocco, you'll be served green tea with mint and sugar when you enter a shop. "Tea is about family or community. People gathering to stop for a moment to enjoy something together," says Holmes.

EXPLORING THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEA

All tea, as I discovered in Kenya, comes from one plant: *Camellia sinensis*. Whether it becomes black, white, or green tea depends on how it is processed. Black teas are oxidized, greens are not (which is why green tea tends to be intensely vegetal or floral). Tea pickers with large wicker baskets work their way over the bushes, plucking two leaves and a bud in an expert twist. White tea is a delicacy – usually made with just buds. "It's like a very young and delicate version of green tea. That's why it's more expensive, because it's painstaking to pick, and only picked for about two weeks of the year," explains Holmes.

Oolongs are somewhere between a black and a green, traditionally produced in China and Taiwan. "Oolongs are really exciting. They're partially oxidized," says Holmes. Tea makers control the flavor by halting the oxidization process at different points. "You might oxidize a tiny bit, so it's nearly green tea but not quite, so you get something that's a bit less vegetal than a green; or go almost all the way to a black tea, and get dark caramel and cacao flavors."

So, if you want to explore the world of tea, where should you start? "Follow your palate. Try different styles to find out

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what you love,” says Henrietta Lovell, founder of the Rare Tea Company, and author of *The Adventures of the Rare Tea Lady* (Faber & Faber, June 2019). “Switching to loose-leaf is a good idea. A teabag is more like a hamburger than a chateaubriand.” Think about where the tea is coming from: it’s no different to sourcing wine from small vineyards or favoring single-estate coffee over instant. “If the tea is sourced directly from an independent tea garden, it’s likely to be made by someone who really cares about flavor,” says Lovell. “From there, it’s just about personal taste. You might love smoky lapsangs or prefer fresh Chinese green teas.”

There are more places than ever to challenge your palate. Tea bars are a big trend in New York. Bosie is a parlor in the West Village, where the tea menu is presided over by Kiley Holliday, the youngest female Tea Master in the U.S. MatchaBar is a hip chain with branches in L.A. and New York. It specializes in drinks made with ceremonial-grade matcha, the earthy green tea powder from Japan. Tea bars are starting to take off in London, too. Good and Proper Tea is a cozy spot with a large selection of oolongs lined up on the counter in glass vials. Teapots and loose-leaf are the order of the day, served with big, pillowy crumpets.

Top hotels are also taking their tea offering seriously. The Alpina Gstaad in Switzerland serves an extraordinary tea

menu at its Japanese restaurant, Megu. Rare teas on the menu include Gyokuro, a Japanese shade-grown green, and an intense but soft 1995 Pu-erh (an aged black tea from China’s Yunnan province). The MI XUN Teahouse at The Temple House in Chengdu is the perfect place to start your journey into the world of Chinese teas. Set around a leafy courtyard, this contemporary take on a traditional teahouse serves more than 40 types of tea, including seasonal teas sourced from a local plantation, in cups and pots designed by a local ceramicist.

A sure sign that interest in tea is growing is its appearance in other trends. Tea is popping up in everything from cakes to cocktails. “Tea cocktails are amazing: hibiscus is beautiful in a Collins – it’s got a tart fresh flavor, and a bright-pink liquor. Chai works in a Mule, and sencha adds a fresh note to drinks muddled with mandarin and mint,” says Holmes.

TEA TRENDS

Nitro tea is another trend to watch out for. Just like nitro coffee, nitrogen is infused into the drink for a creamier, smoother result. “It’s popular already in the States, where you can get a nitro chai or matcha,” says Holmes. “I think these trends, along with matcha, are here to stay as tools in the tool belts of mixologists, tea purveyors, and café owners. As the public learns more about tea, we’ll see even more trends develop and eventually become norms,” says Gebely.



Top to bottom: Matcha tea; women harvesting tea leaves in Sri Lanka

One of the things we’re learning is that tea comes with health benefits. The tea experts are reluctant to claim their beloved drink is a fix-all elixir, but many studies indicate that tea is rich in antioxidants, can aid digestion, and helps control weight. Two cups a day may even reduce your risk of developing cancer, heart disease, dementia, or diabetes, according to research published by *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

Any potential health benefits are a bonus for tea’s growing army of fans. The more you discover about this fascinating drink, the more you want to learn. In the words of Lovell: “Tea is loved around the world because there are so many different flavor profiles. It’s safe, it’s delicious, and it floods your life with pleasure.”

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Top: Afternoon tea at The Wolseley in London. Bottom: Traditional tea ceremony in Japan

FIVE GREAT TEA EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

1 PARTICIPATE IN A JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY

For a truly memorable experience, take part in a traditional tea ceremony in Japan at a teahouse or tea garden. Guests sit on a *tatami* floor while a tea master carefully prepares the green tea, which is drunk in bowls. Kyoto and Uji are two great spots to find a traditional teahouse.



2 INDULGE IN AFTERNOON TEA IN LONDON

Afternoon tea is a lavish affair in London, with hotels and upscale tearooms serving pots of loose-leaf tea with a tiered stand laden with miniature cakes, pastries, and finger sandwiches. The Wolseley, a grand café on Piccadilly, is a favorite spot with Londoners.

3 VISIT A TEA GARDEN IN INDIA

If you’d like to see how tea is harvested, Gebely recommends Makaibari in West Bengal, India. This Darjeeling producer offers ecotourism visits, which include tea plucking, manufacturing, and tasting. Try full-moon harvesting.

4 TAKE A TEA MARKET TOUR IN CHINA

Another insider favorite of Gebely’s: “If you’d like to experience the largest variety of teas and teaware available in China, spend a few days wandering



through the 3,000 shops within Fangcun Tea Market in Guangzhou.”

5 TASTE GYOKURO TEA AT THE ALPINA GSTAAD IN SWITZERLAND

The hotel sources a rare Gyokuro tea from Japan. Grown in a misty climate, the tea is covered with bamboo and straw shades a few weeks before picking to filter out most of the sunlight. This leads to dark-green leaves and a pure and light-tasting tea.