A hand is shown pouring a stream of amber-colored tea from a black, textured teapot into a small, dark cup. The teapot has a lid with a knob and a spout. The background is a solid, deep red color. The overall scene is a close-up, focusing on the act of pouring tea.

# THE STORY OF TEA

A Cultural History and Drinking Guide

MARY LOU HEISS and  
ROBERT J. HEISS

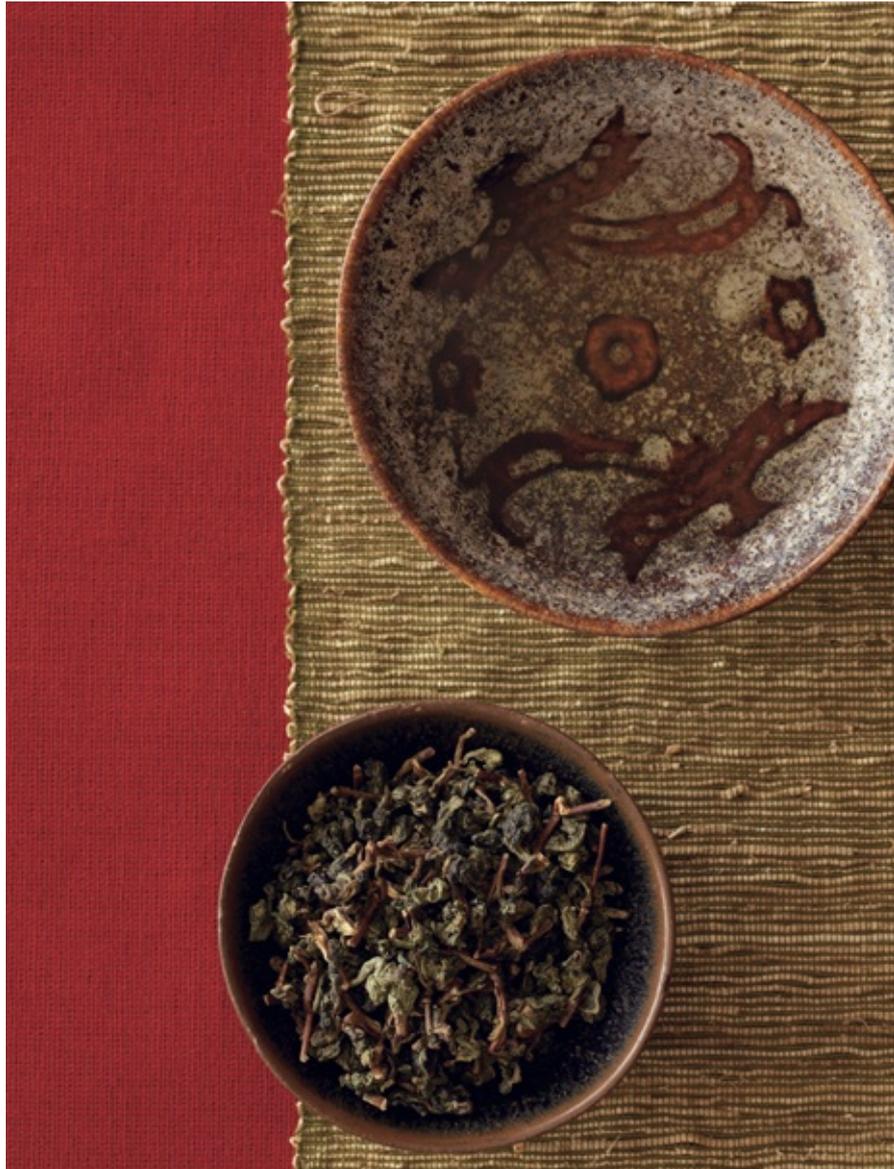
# the story of tea

A Cultural History and  
Drinking Guide



mary lou heiss and robert j. heiss

  
ten speed press  
Berkeley



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Maps on [this page](#) and [this page](#) by Scott Lowry.

v3.1

To William H. Ukers

You blazed the trail and in your footsteps we all follow.

# **contents**

**Preface**  
**Acknowledgments**  
**Introduction**

- 1. A Brief History of Tea**
- 2. The Life of a Tea Bush**
- 3. Manufacture: From Fresh Leaves to Distinctive Tea**
- 4. Journeying along the Tea Trail**
- 5. An Encyclopedia of Tea**
- 6. Brewing the Perfect Cup**
- 7. Tea Customs and Culture**
- 8. The Health Benefits of Tea**
- 9. Ethics in the Tea Trade**
- 10. Cooking with Tea**

**Buyer's Resources**  
**Glossary**  
**Bibliography**  
**About the Authors**  
**Index**



## PREFACE

AS TEA MERCHANTS, we are drawn to teas that possess a distinctive style, teas that hold the feeling of the place where they were made in the folds and creases of their tiny leaves. We are captivated by the influence of what the French call *terroir*—that distinction of flavor akin to a cultural stamp of identity that undeniably pinpoints a product to its origin.

Terroir is determined by the physical realities of soil, altitude, climate, and geography, and also by the more evanescent and less apparent threads of history, cultural preferences, and tradition. All of these determinants consort to yield what author Fred Plotkin has referred to as “somewhereness.” Think about a glass of chilled, effervescent Champagne or a mug of spicy, rich hot chocolate embellished with a touch of ground chile and cinnamon, and you are envisioning two great examples of “somewhereness.” Each beverage is unique and specific to its “somewhere”; each is completely foreign in spirit to the other place.

Terroir exists for all foods, but the effects of terroir are most easily understood and tasted in such examples as coffee, cheese, olives and olive oil, rice, spirits, water, wine, and tea. Viewed in concert with these other food products, tea perhaps seems to be the simplest of the group—a humble green leaf that is plucked from a bush, then dried and brewed. In fact, the experienced Chinese farmer who has a few tea bushes growing by his back door can simply pick and parch a few tea leaves in a hot wok over a charcoal fire pan for his own tea-drinking enjoyment.

But along its more than two-thousand-year journey to today, tea has developed into something much more complicated and place specific. Time has allowed for the creation of tens of thousands of different teas, each of which are produced by people who till the soil in a multitude of tea gardens large and small. The net result is a staggering amount of tea produced annually—not just tea, but different teas, unique teas, teas that are made nowhere else. Six classes of tea (each with several subclasses) have developed into an industry that ranges from vital to emergent in approximately fifty countries. Statistics for worldwide tea consumption pegs tea as second only to water as the most commonly drunk liquid in the world.

In tea-producing countries, tea is as important to life as is food. Tea is consumed both as a thinking person’s beverage and as an everyman’s delight. Tea drinking is a tactile, sensory activity that provides both intellectual stimulation and aesthetic inspiration during times of social gathering or solitary contemplation. In the East tea is more highly regarded for these transcendental qualities than it is for its caffeine content or healthful benefits. The pleasurable ritual of tea drinking is deeply encoded in these cultures and religions, and tea permeates and sustains life in ways that those of us in the West simply fail to comprehend.

Our search for fine tea draws us back time and again to Asia, for tea that is carefully crafted in small villages by master tea processors who have learned their skills from previous tea masters. These tea processors will in turn pass their skills on to younger workers and to the new generation graduating from agricultural universities with degrees in tea management.

In some countries tea production is still very much hands-on work. Tea production is a combination of science and cooperation from nature along with the experienced senses of tea workers who can see, feel, and hear the elusive changes occurring in the transformation of the fresh leaf into finished tea. From hand-plucking to hand-sorting, to hand-processing to hand-sorting again, and finally to hand-packing, we are fascinated by tea that is made by human hands that have developed the necessary sense of touch and feel that we call “knowing.” This human factor conveys—in hand movements, glances, and the concentration etched on the tea workers’ faces—indefinable but almost tangible connections to the wisdom of the sages and the tea masters who came before.

From China to India to Sri Lanka these tea workers all share a common connection with the land and a keen awareness of the way their tea should be. Perhaps most important and most difficult to define is an appreciation for the way that the *leaf wants to be*. Experienced tea workers know to work *with* the leaf and the calendar, not against either. To pluck the right size leaf at the right time of the season, and leave the rest alone until its proper time, is a decision that can only be made from knowledge and experience. The same goes for knowing when to prune and when to let a plant rest. No calendar can tell a tea master when the precise moment is right to pluck the first tender tea sprouts that emerge in the earliest days of frost-laden spring.

Determining how long to let the tea wither, how long to roll it, to oxidize it, to fluff it, or how long to let it sit over the charcoal embers to dry is an art. The timing must be impeccable or the tea will be less than spectacular or ruined. An experienced tea master must pay attention not only to the progress of the leaf’s transformation but also to the weather—the dryness, the humidity, the lack or abundance of rain.

When we visit tea-producing countries, we become the students to these masters. We are always humbled by the depths of their knowledge, their experience, and their willingness (despite the language pitfalls) to educate us so that we may in turn educate our customers and readers. For the past thirty years tea has played an important role in our Northampton, Massachusetts, shop Cooks Shop Here. Since those early days, tea became our passion. This book is our attempt to transmit the information and knowledge that we have garnered trekking along the tea trail to our interested readers. We hope to cut through the sometimes confusing prattle about tea by providing in-depth information and understanding about processes that many people have written about but few have actually witnessed.

Explaining to someone how something is made is always a tricky balance of deciding what information is important and to whom that information is

relevant. Because we answer questions about tea every day in our shop (and have had hundreds of tea discussions with customers over the years), we have attempted to provide in this book material that appeals to beginning tea enthusiasts as well as to seasoned tea professionals. Our goal is to give readers the behind-the-scenes information about the life rhythms and work cycles in a tea village or factory. We also offer our sensibilities regarding the complexity and intrigue of an ancient beverage in today's fast-paced, modern world. If along the way we convert new enthusiasts into the ranks of regular tea drinkers, or if we pique readers' interests to branch out and try new teas, we will have been successful.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS PROJECT, we hoped we would do justice to how extraordinarily fascinating and colorful the world of tea is. Thankfully, during our travels, research, and writing both in the United States and abroad, we found many kindred spirits who provided us with information, explanations, photographs, meals, travel guidance, language translation, delicious cups of rare and distinguished tea, compassion, and understanding, as well as friendship and congenial hospitality. Without them this book would not be possible, and with them we have succeeded in our task.

None of us in the tea industry would have a job were it not for the hard work and dedication of the tea pluckers, tea factory managers, and tea processors worldwide who continue to maintain high standards of excellence despite ever-increasing difficulties. To all of you, we bow in awe and gratitude.

Our understanding of the patterns of life in the tea gardens would all be academic rhetoric were it not for the men and women who welcomed us into their tea gardens, tea factories, tea research facilities, and university classrooms. Their efforts to educate us enabled us to observe and document the continuation of a time-honored, traditional craft. To all of you who are part of the success and the vigor of today's tea industry, we thank you from our hearts and wish you a thousand blessings.

Our literary agent, Lisa Ekus, steered us brilliantly and with great foresight to Ten Speed Press for this project. The trust and support we have found from Philip Wood, Lorena Jones, and Aaron Wehner at Ten Speed Press have allowed us to tell the story of tea from our insider's point of view. Our editor, Brie Mazurek, showed courage and forbearance in handling the onslaught of text and images, wrangling a sleek book with strong voice out of a mountain of information. Copyeditor Amy Smith Bell is to be commended for her fine, sensitive hand and dagger pencil. Studio photographer Angie Cao and stylist Bergren Rameson brought our collection of teawares to life in the studio. And designer Toni Tajima created a visually stunning book that compliments the colorfulness and the humanity of the tea industry.

We wish to specifically thank the following colleagues and friends who helped us fill in the information gaps, understand the minutia of tea manufacturing techniques, and grasp the transitory nature of time, weather, and change over the course of a season in a tea garden in lands so far away.

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And lastly, we want to thank all dedicated tea drinkers. Please know that your support of artisan tea supports the health and vitality of tea makers around the world and gives them hope for a bright future.



Jade Dragon Snow Mountain rises in the distance behind Black Dragon Pool and the Moon-Embracing Temple in Lijiang (Yunnan Province, China).

## INTRODUCTION

TEA HAS A LONG AND TURBULENT HISTORY, filled with intrigue, adventure, fortune gained and lost, embargoes, drugs, taxation, smugglers, war, revolution, religious aestheticism, artistic expression, and social change. Tea's association with colorful, far-off lands fabled for richly textured fabrics, aromatic spices, and delicate porcelain tableware helps to explain how a humble commodity from China came to both fire the imagination and stimulate the palate of upper-class Europeans in the early seventeenth century. Eventually this commodity would capture the attention of the entire Western world. This sweeping history, contained in a single cup of tea, is a riveting narrative that belies the gentle and relaxing nature of this mild-mannered beverage. Around the planet millions of people in all walks of life begin their day with a brisk cup of hot tea. They rely on the soothing, relaxing nature of tea in the afternoon to smooth away the rough edges of the day.

The days when tall, sleek clipper ships raced full-throttle across the seas to deliver another cargo of precious tea leaf have long been replaced by a new era. Today tea enthusiasts need do nothing more than visit the local teashop to select an aromatic tea that catches our fancy. Although times have changed, the centuries-old relationship between the hands-on work of the tea growers and pickers, the environment and the land, and the natural cycle of the harvests still flows according to the traditional rhythms of the seasons in remote tea gardens. A monumental volume of tea is produced annually, especially in the exceptional crop year, when weather cooperates and generously rewards the strenuous efforts and dedication of tea farmers. Working in harmony with nature and by maintaining a keen understanding of the end product desired, tea farmers, pickers, managers, processors, and researchers work in unison to bring a wealth of tea-leaf styles to market each year. Tea is a balancing act between flavor and aroma that carries in its essence the singular stamp of the culture that produced it.

All tea leaf is plucked from the same species of tea plant, known as *Camellia sinensis*, which is grown from one of three primary origin-specific varietal bushes—China bush, Assam bush, and Java bush. *Camellia sinensis* is a sturdy evergreen bush that features dark green, glossy, serrated leaves. Tea is cultivated by every tea-producing country from numerous local hybrids that have been developed for vigor, disease resistance, and weather tolerance. But when we taste a selection of teas, we can clearly see that Chinese tea differs from Indian tea, and neither tastes like Ceylon tea. China is famous for fresh-tasting, sweet, and delicate green tea, while India leads the world in the production of aromatic, flavorful, and bracing black tea—yet, interestingly, both teas originate from the same plant. Japan is known for carefully tended, fresh, and astringent green teas that differ greatly in style and flavor from Chinese green teas.



A tea plucker gathers leaves that will be processed and rolled into Gunpowder tea at the local tea factory in the hills surrounding Shengxian (Zhejiang Province, China).

So if all teas are harvested from the same species of tea bush, what accounts for the great differences between the seemingly endless varieties of tea? The most clearly visible answer is in the method of manufacture the leaf is given. In other words the process of turning fresh tea leaf into green tea differs from that used to make a black tea or an oolong or a white tea, because theoretically any fresh leaf can be made into any style of tea.

But that is the simple answer, which does not do justice to the intricacies and complexities of the world of tea. Many other invisible influences come into play that are not as easy to see. When we take a wide-angle look at the differences between tea leaves, we are only able to discern the obvious distinctions between black tea, green, oolong, and white teas. If we move in for a closer look at a selection of green teas or black teas, however, we can begin to see that culture and heritage are reflected in the various leaf styles. Tea-producing countries work within the boundaries of their established traditions, preserving much and changing little. These strong cultural factors bring character and individuality to the manufacturing techniques, resulting in teas that are as unique as a fingerprint.

When we zoom in even closer, we discover that tea production for any single country is actually a composite of a multitude of place-specific teas produced in various regions within that country. For example, whether tea is harvested in the north or south, central or coastal areas, each regional tea contributes a leaf of unique character and style to that region's roster of specialties. In each region all the variables of tea production—the soil, the growing conditions, the habit and pruning of the bushes, the timing of the picking, the leaf style being picked, the skill of the tea pickers, the weather

during the harvest, and the experience of the tea processors—must be considered. It is here, within the different interpretations of these variables, that tradition, culture, and *terroir* combine to create the great teas of the world.

It's no wonder that a simple cup of tea is far from a simple matter, and that tea enthusiasts' attraction to this exhilarating beverage was responsible for changing the course of history for more than one country. So journey with us to the exotic lands where tea gardens cloak the hillsides in blankets of soft emerald green and a warm welcome always awaits in the hand of a stranger extending a humble cup of hot, fragrant tea.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEA

IN THE VEILED DAWN OF PREHISTORY, tea was consumed in the vast nexus of Assam (in northeastern India), the Yunnan Province (in southwestern China), along the northern borders of neighboring Burma (known today as Myanmar), Laos (officially Lao People's Democratic Republic), Vietnam, and Thailand. Tea's origins and ascendancy began in China, long considered to be the source of indigenous tea bushes and, later, the birthplace of the first cultivated tea gardens. Along Yunnan's southern edge its borders with Myanmar and Laos meet to form a rugged, mountainous area that is easily defined on paper but difficult to separate in reality. Here a thick covering of forest jungle melds this place into one lush, tropical expanse. Anthropologists now know that tea trees existed and still exist today in large swaths of remote, forested land that straddled the border areas of these countries.

For centuries this region has supported populations of ethnic minorities for whom the borders have provided porous access through the jungle—and the tea bushes and trees therein have provided fresh leaf for indigenous styles of tea and tea-drinking customs.

Awareness of tea spread first from Yunnan, throughout China, then to the rest of Asia, and finally to the West. In Yunnan indigenous wild tea trees are still found in the old-growth forests of Xishuangbanna, an agricultural region nourished by the rich and fertile watershed of the Mekong River. The tea trees are located across seven tea mountains, many of which are calculated to be five hundred to a thousand years old. These ancient trees are a living patrimony for local populations of Dai and Bulang minorities, who revere the trees as a precious, living inheritance from their ancestors. From the beginning, China found the tea bush to be useful, and the people eventually embraced tea drinking with a deep-rooted passion that captivated the rest of the world. Researchers of Chinese history have reconstructed a timeline tracing the development of tea drinking in China, noting that the use of tea changed and evolved with the advent of each successive dynasty. Thus tea was brewed in various ways, depending on the fashion of the day and the whims of the emperor.



At one time tea leaves were used to concoct a medicinal brew. Later, tea was viewed more as a healthful tonic and was compressed into hard little cakes, then scraped, roasted, and boiled with salt into a bitter brew. Eventually, tea leaves were ground into a fine powder and then whipped with a delicate bamboo whisk into a light green froth, resulting in a beverage that came yet one step closer to what we associate today as a cup of tea. As tea usage in China changed, the culture of tea drinking developed into a highly stylized and sophisticated social etiquette, with established manners, status, and rank that in turn encouraged an appreciation for art, poetry, and songs.

## **From Food to Medicine: Early Uses for Tea**

Anthropologists speculate that prehistoric humans (the species *Homo erectus*) discovered indigenous tea trees growing wild in the forests of Yunnan. The quest to discover edibles in the environment would have eventually tempted

these early inhabitants to chew on the leaves of the tea trees, perhaps stimulated by their own curiosity or from watching the actions of forest-dwelling animals. They would have discovered these leaves to be a source of invigorating energy that might sustain them on their daily rounds of foraging for food.

Once these prehistoric humans learned the skills of fire building, they gained warmth and protection from the elements, and soon they acquired the ability to cook meat and boil water. Surrounded by an abundance of wild-growing tea trees, they felled these trees to use for fuel. Most likely along the way they experimented with adding tea leaves and other forest barks and leaves to boiling water, which was then stewed into various strong, bitter, and invigorating concoctions.

By the time of the Shang dynasty (1766–1050 BC), tea was being consumed in Yunnan Province for its medicinal properties. For any given ailment, tea leaves were boiled with a host of other forest plants, seeds, barks, and leaves to concoct healing herbal remedies. Wisdom gleaned from the trial and error of using these herbal concoctions laid the groundwork for the great herbal-healing traditions for which China would later become famous. Early on, tea was thus among the growing pharmacopoeia in China of ingredients considered useful and necessary for maintaining one's health.

By the end of the Zhou dynasty (1122–256 BC), indigenous tea trees were also found growing wild in Sichuan Province, Yunnan's neighbor to the northeast. It is believed that here, for the first time, people began to boil tea leaves for consumption into a concentrated liquid *without* the addition of other leaves or herbs, thereby using tea as a bitter yet stimulating drink, rather than a medicinal concoction.

## Tea and China's Great Religions

China's three great philosophy religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—sprouted toward the middle of the Zhou dynasty. Each of these religions embraced tea for its healthful virtues and powers of rejuvenation. Monks and priests who were introduced to tea found that this beverage would help them stay awake during long meditations. To these holy men, tea represented a virtuous and necessary tonic, which they declared to be the “elixir of life” that should be consumed daily by all people. As the popularity of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism spread throughout China, so did an awareness of life-enhancing tea.



A monk (Gyantse, Tibet).

It was under the rule of Qin Shihuangdi, the first Qin emperor (r. 221–210 BC), however, that the greatest number of Chinese citizens came to hear of this beneficial tonic. During his reign China became a unified country; a collection of previously warring states thus turned into a single empire with a centralized administration. The emperor was responsible for monumental building projects the region had not yet witnessed. Under Qin Shihuangdi's rule isolated segments of fortification walls that had been built in earlier times were linked together to create one strong defensive wall that would define his empire. This became the first stage of the Great Wall of China. The emperor ordered the construction of a multitude of grand and elaborate imperial palaces as well as the creation of his own tomb, which he outfitted with thousands of the now famous terra-cotta warriors. These projects brought massive numbers of workers from across China to live in compulsory labor camps. As workers shared information and praised the wonders of their homelands, their customs and special foods, those from the western provinces spoke of the invigorating qualities of tea. As word of this beneficial tonic spread across the empire, tea became a much sought-after commodity—everyone who heard of tea wanted to try it. Around 53 BC a holy man named Wu LiZhen is credited with planting a cultivated tea garden in an isolated spot atop Mengding Mountain in Sichuan Province. His tea plants, today referred to as the Seven Tea Trees, established a tea garden that yielded tea of such purity and delicacy that it would become one of the exclusive Tribute Tea Gardens reserved for use only by the emperor. Wu LiZhen is thus called the forefather of tea cultivation, as it was from this first garden that the seeds of Sichuan's extensive tea gardens came (see [chapter 4](#)).

Tea's destiny changed course during the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). Former western barbarian territories, including Sichuan and Yunnan, and all of the southern provinces were brought into the fold of the Chinese Celestial Empire. This geographic change made it easier for common people to obtain