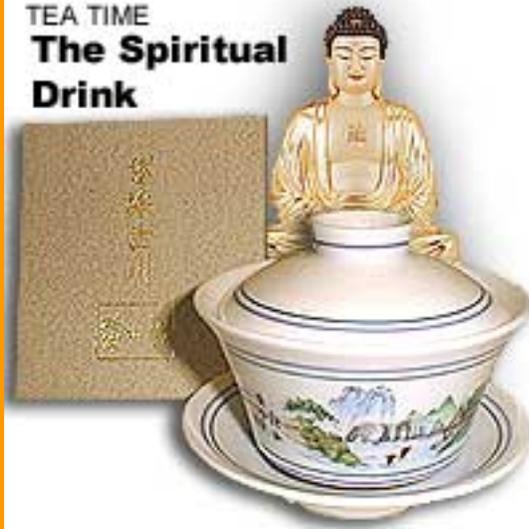


The Blessed Drink

Zen and the Art of Drinking Tea

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TEA TIME
**The Spiritual
Drink**



Connecticut -- When it comes to tea, Pearl Dexter is particular about what she drinks, how she prepares it and the way she drinks it. She is so particular, in fact, that when she travels she takes her own kettle to boil the water, a pot to steep the tea and her favorite brand of tea.

It wasn't always that way. Ask her about her favorite tea moment and it has nothing to do with rare multihued tea leaves or specialized preparation techniques. The publisher of Tea A Magazine and the owner of Olde English Tea Co. in Scotland, Conn., fell in love with tea over a set of cups that came from the bank as a deposit incentive and a bag of Lipton.

"It was from the red and yellow box with the captain on it," she says, laughing. "I was sitting at the kitchen table with my mother. I was one of 12 children and over tea was when we had time to talk. She'd sit with me and we'd have tea."

When you talk with tea lovers, they will explain why you must prepare tea a certain way. They will lock right onto your eyes and go into exacting detail over why one brand of Earl Grey is superior to another. They will engage in intense, though polite, debates about why one kind of teacup is better than another. But when it comes right down to it, they say, having tea is about enjoying yourself alone or in the company of others, and discovering what you like. While doing so, they add, you might discover a little more about yourself.

"People who enjoy tea are finding time to find something beautiful in their lives," says Dana Spicer, one of the owners of Mainly Tea in Wethersfield. "They are taking the time to sit down and reflect and make sense out of what happens to us. It is a time to escape from the stresses and strains of everyday life."



When it comes to finding what you like, Connecticut's tea experts have lots of recommendations for those looking for guidance.

Drink what you like. That sounds like easy advice to follow, but there are about 380 varieties of tea. The key is to try as many as possible. Not only is there a choice between the different kinds of black, oolong and green teas, but there are sub-varieties of each type. Take Earl Grey, a black tea blended with the citrus fragrance of oil of bergamot. Some Earl Grey teas are blended with natural oil of bergamot, others with artificial. And, of those blended with natural oil of bergamot, the scent of some barge out of the tin and grab your nose with an exuberant shout. Others escape with a seductive whisper. Each tastes different.

The aroma, body and taste of the tea can vary according to the time of year it is picked. Take Darjeelings, black teas grown in India. First flush Darjeelings are picked in the spring, are generally the most prized and often fade the fastest. Second flush teas are usually picked in the summer, or sometime after May, and have a more intense flavor. Teas picked after October are called Autumnal flush.

James Norwood Pratt, the author of the "New Tea Lover's Treasury" (Publishing Technology Associates, \$24.95), says other factors can affect the taste of any particular tea as well, including the amount of sun and clouds, the direction of the slope the tea plant is growing on, the soil chemistry, the temperature range that season and the amount of rainfall. If that all seems too much to keep track of, you might consider hooking up with a tea aficionado who does. Connecticut's Harney & Sons sends representatives around the world looking for the best teas. Other experts include Ragna Tischler Goddard, who owns and runs the tea room at Sundial Gardens in Higganum. And Barbara and John Jago-Ford, who run the British Shoppe in Madison, recently purchased a tea wholesaler and can speak intelligently about this year's crop. Other experts can be found in numerous tea shops around Connecticut.

Even Cups Make A Difference

As for how to drink tea, most of Connecticut's tea experts are strong advocates of the china teacup.

"Tea should only be drunk out of bone china," says John Jago-Ford who uses such cups in the Front Parlour Tea Room at the British Shoppe. "It just tastes better."

John Harney president of Harney & Sons, not only agrees a teacup is best, but specifically recommends one that is smaller at the bottom than at the top. It should have a handle, he says. "The tea cools off quicker and you can drink it sooner." But he admits to sometimes resorting to a mug, particularly when he is in a hurry and plans to gulp his tea rather than sip it. "Mugs can be nice in the morning when you are in rush," he says. "A teacup is more for sipping."

Pearl Dexter, on the other hand, prefers a teacup that comes up sharply

and is narrower at the top. Otherwise, she says, the tea cools off too quickly for her tastes.

Diane Lareau AmEnde, the owner of the Tea Cozy in Windsor, serves tea at her shop only out of bone china. But she says any kind of cup is fine - except never ever drink tea out of Styrofoam. If that is your only choice, it might be better to do without.

More Than A Beverage

Tea should be an event, she adds and the others agree. "It's not just a beverage," she says. The food you eat with tea can help make it an event. Many tea shops sell some sort of variation on Afternoon Tea, with small sandwiches, scones and dessert. Others sell hearty soups and full meals. Several tea shop owners said most customers come for the food, rather than the tea. But, for the owners, the tea is the main event.

The Sundial's Goddard explains why. "When you drink a beverage made from the leaves of a tea plant, you benefit from two ways, which is confusing for most Western people. There is a soothing effect. You feel at ease with yourself and any stress seems simply to be gone. At the same time, it stimulates brain function. You feel sharp and alert."

As opposed to the blast-off and sharp letdown of coffee, she says, with tea it's a gradual lift and a gentle set down. "You drink one cup of tea and after 45 minutes, you will reach your peak. After another 45 minutes, it will taper off."

Because of these properties, Buddhist monks, who were instrumental in the development of tea and its traditions, use tea as a vehicle to help them meditate, she says. "It helped them calm their mind and gave them a feeling of being centered."

And, even for those who don't know the first thing about meditation, making and drinking tea can have a similar effect.

"When people take time to make and drink tea properly, you can just see their shoulders relax as they drink it. You know, they are doing the hunch thing. Then you can see them sigh. And, finally, relax," says AmEnde.

The whole ritual of preparing tea properly, she says, forces you to slow down and even reflect on your life. "You can't make the water boil until it's ready," she says. "You need to calm down. You can't hurry. You have to measure it. Put it in the pot. You have to do things in a certain order or it won't work. That's the whole ritual of tea. It forces you to have that in your life. If you don't have that in your life, you are worse for wear."

Kakuzo Okakura, in his classic text, "The Book of Tea" (Charles E. Tuttle, \$26.95), says drinking tea, or "teaism," is "founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It is



essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life."

Harney agrees.

"He means that, with tea, you can find a little bit of enjoyment every day, several times a day," he says.

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- at http://articles.courant.com/2001-07-19/features/0107190500_1_earl-grey-tea-pearl-dexter

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