

Prologue



Calcuttans are great lovers of reading. The city's College Street is lined with bookshops of varying sizes filled with people ready to empty their wallets.

Loose tea (leaf tea)

This means black tea packed in a tea cannister. As tea leaves are measured with a caddy spoon, it is necessary to distinguish loose tea from tea bags. It is called 'bara-cha' in Japanese.

Instant tea

Milk and fruits-extract added to powdered black tea-extract and sugar and tea is ready by adding hot or cold water.

Tea provides relaxation and tranquillity of mind. Obtain some leaves, and at home, boil water, brew according to your preferred strength and then pour the tea into a cup – as a result we feel relaxed and find spiritual satisfaction both through the performance of this rite and the passing of time. Drinking tea is not simply the quenching of thirst; it is also a cultural act. This is why it is known as 'tea culture'.

However, these days since the availability on the market of industrially produced RTD-Teas (ready-to-drink teas: tinned and bottled liquid tea essence), the value of tea itself has considerably changed. When I look into the marketing aspect of the Japanese black tea industry, I feel that I can sense the first signs of a decline.

At the beginning of 1970, when the black tea market was liberalised in Japan, 'black tea' simply meant loose tea (leaf tea). However, tea bags sold as a 'handy product' soon dominated the market as did also 'instant tea' which appeared as a matching concept to an established 'instant coffee'. Though consumers selected these different types of tea according to TPO (Time, Place and Opportunity), there remains a traditionally 'wise' or

informed consumption pattern.

Therefore, even if recently introduced liquid black tea has appeared on the market, I had assumed that this kind of black tea would not in any way influence the conventional 'wise' tea consumption – black tea, tinned or bottled, having been accepted as an independently different type of commercial product such as soft-drink with nothing to do with conventional black tea. But due to a lack of understanding, this assumption has proved wrong.

Our life tends to move according to economic laws, particularly in Japan where changes are swift. My feeling is that 'tea culture' is being ignored with tea itself just surviving in its instant form as an industrially produced soft drink. This may seem an extreme or outrageous claim, but it would be true to say that we have a new generation which has only just recently discovered 'black tea' simply as a soft drink sold in vending machines. They believe that black tea as soft drink is the authentic black tea; that is to say, quite unbelievably, there is not the common knowledge that black tea is made with tea leaves and hot water.

Five Golden Rules

1. Use fresh, good quality tea leaves.
2. Use slightly more tea leaves than required.
3. Use fresh water.
4. Boil water thoroughly.
5. Allow to steep for a while in a pot.

Also there is the strange phenomenon of a ‘black tea boom’ created by the mass media. There is a flood of catalogues, primers, instruction manuals and magazines introducing hundreds of black tea recipes. However, I believe many consumers may have been disappointed with the resulting tea, as they took those beautifully illustrated variations of tea seriously by following these time consuming recipes. These recipes include black tea with whipped cream and fruit, mainly I should think only to look good photographed. Undrinkable simply as tea, perhaps the term ‘visual tea’ would be more appropriate – it is more natural that fruit should be eaten by itself. But regrettably the majority do not see it this way, so our conclusion must be that black tea in Japan may be in decline. The ‘black tea boom’ is, therefore, a myth.

However, the fact remains that 5 per cent of Japan’s population still do enjoy black tea in the traditional way and remain unswayed by the latest craze. However, the present distribution system of black tea to these 5 per cent has become almost impossible due to a fixed Japanese distribution system which prevails over economic rationality and therefore cannot cope with these few consumers’ demands. For instance, in provincial

cities, the unitary one pound (450g) of loose tea is not available for purchase. This type of tea once freely available during the 1970s has disappeared from the shops, the reason being that it was not as profitable to sell one pound packets among only 5 per cent of consumers, than to satisfy the demand of other 95 per cent consumers who have not the slightest interest in black tea. The best outlets for this kind of marketing are the automatic vending machines which are available everywhere in Japan. Half of these five million or so machines are for selling soft drinks. Through this outlet, black tea consumption, such as it is, has spread to those 95 per cent who have not drunk tea much before. As I have mentioned, we now have a generation who know only tinned black tea as the ‘real’ thing.

Choosing between liquid tea packed in tins and bottles, or strange tea decorated for visual effect, is difficult. But in the matter of deciding which of the two Japanese black teas is preferable, ‘chai’ stands on its own. Possibly ‘chai’ is already familiar to those who follow ethnic fashion, or are familiar with tea shop menus. And here we are speaking of a type of tea made by stewing and boiling, rather than by following the formal method of the ‘Five Golden Rules’.

‘To save unnecessary expenses, instead of eating breakfast I got into the habit of just drinking a cup of chai at a chai-seller whom I had been frequenting. After having casually rinsed the cup and saucer in a bucket of water, he filled the cup right to the brim. First I sipped the overflowed tea in the saucer and then drank from the cup. If the tea was too hot I poured a little more into the saucer to cool, and drank that first’. (Midnight Express written by Kotaro Sawaki, published by Shincho Bunko.)

‘At the side of the road, a man was boiling water over burning rubbish in order to make and sell chai; I exchanged a coin for a cup – it was nice and sweet. There were a lot of flies everywhere, and I had to move my cup all the time while drinking’. (by Yuji Shimokawa, Seeing the World from the Bus Roof, published by Travel Journal.)

Such is the natural harmony that exists between human beings and tea, that one thinks little of the actual quality of the leaves, water, and utensils; we take no account of whether or not the tea comes from a tin, or of its value.

After a long association with tea during which I have largely

been concerned with providing a formally brewed pot-service, I find these experiences of mine have caused me seriously to reconsider the connection between myself and tea. Indeed chai is a drink which forges a relationship between tea and human beings which is all the closer for being simple in its form. And in this way we can feel the actual power which tea has. To tell the truth, during my trip to India in 1993, I was greatly moved by my experiences in the course of repeated encounters with ‘chai’.

Though I am not completely under the spell of India, I decided, nevertheless, to write about this one aspect of the country – the world of chai – from the point of view of a tea merchant. And my hope is that it will enable readers to question current attitudes to black tea and its consumption.

India is such a vast country. And life being so short I am unable to write a book worthy of the title ‘The Chai shops of India’. Instead I limit myself to one titled ‘Chai shops in Calcutta’ and leave it to others to write about India as a whole.

Previously in my *Handbook of Tea* (Kocha no Hon), I had

expressed disapproval of the word 'chai'. But I now realise that this view is dogmatic in the extreme and therefore unwarranted. For me now it is a most charming word; so let me introduce you to its charm.