



Chasing Two Leaves and a Bud

Tea was first introduced in West Bengal in the mid-19th century and its sprawling tea estates are reminiscent of the bygone era. A trip to these tea plantations is all about misty mornings, endless walks discovering various types of tea and above all, tasting a variety of tea, some flavours even unheard of. Tasting Tea is a ritual. A delight for taste buds. The article explores some finest tea tasted in their purest and infused forms.

Words & Images: Sugato Mukherjee

“Have you ever seen a horse walking back home at the end of a day?” Bertie Amritanand asks me before answering himself. “He trots faster. The same thing happens with the tea bushes. Before going into hibernation for the winter months, the trees give a final surge in late autumn. We call it the Autumn Crescendo.” Bertie finishes pointing to the bright chestnut-coloured liquid in the last of the line of white bowls on the table before us.



We are in the tasting room of Glenburn estate's tea factory that dates back to 1859 and like all the 87 tea estates of Darjeeling, tea tasting is a serious business here. This is the room where the flavour characteristics of tea, freshly produced in the factory, are determined by a trained taster and once the quality has been graded, each tea company places a value on it based on availability and demand, and market trends.

Our motley group of four has gathered near the tasting table. We take our turns to scoop a large spoonful of tea from a bowl, slurp it up noisily, swirl it into our mouth to ensure that both the tea and plenty of oxygen is passed over all the taste buds to give an equitable taste profile of the tea. And then spit out the liquid into a receptacle before moving onto the next sample to taste.

To Bertie's delight, we concur that the earthy aroma and rich malty taste of Autumn Crescendo, with its lingering chocolaty notes is the winner; though the full-bodied woody flavour of the Monsoon Flush, with a distinctive bouquet of smoke and hay, comes a close second.

A quick tour of the factory follows, where the tea leaves, freshly plucked from the gardens, are placed on withering troughs for 14 to 16 hours before they are rolled into wispy strings, fermented to a coppery red with a strong smell of slightly decayed apples and finally dried to reduce the moisture to less than 2 per cent, and assume the finest aroma that pure Darjeeling tea has been associated with for more than 160 years. The sorting room looks particularly busy where about a dozen women, their faces covered with scarves as a protective gear against the tea dust, are sorting the dried tea into grades of different sizes.

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In the evening, we take leisurely postprandial sips of Moonshine – a white tea that is Glenburn estate's specialty, produced from select tea bushes in very small batches in the first few days of spring. The almost transparent liquid has a slight tint of yellow and its flowery bouquet coupled with a delicate finish with hints of peach makes it one of the most expensive teas in Darjeeling.

“What makes Darjeeling tea so special?” I ask Bertie, who has been a planter all his life, in gardens of Assam, Darjeeling and East Africa.

“You have got similar factors in all these places, and also in Sri Lanka, which has a booming tea trade these days. The soil, the elevation, the mist and humidity...everything matches up. Except one thing,” Bertie pauses, and makes an elaborate sweep of hand towards the rippling sea of green that extends beyond the neatly manicured lawns, stretching to the point where the long, corrugated mountain ridges blend into the horizon. Dark monsoon clouds hover above the mist-drenched slopes, beyond which, the staggering Kanchenjunga range dominates the horizon on a clear day. “Himalayas?” I ask. “Yes, it is those mountains that make Darjeeling brew the champagne of teas, and it cannot be replicated elsewhere,” Bertie concludes, an unmistakable whiff of pride in his voice. This reminds me of a conversation I had a few years ago with Rajah Banerjee – the



charismatic fourth-generation owner of the fabled Makaibari tea estate. “Darjeeling tea owes its identity to the Himalayas,” the veteran planter had told me. Makaibari has passed onto different hands since and in a magnanimous gesture, Banerjee has gifted his remaining stake to the tea workers of the estate his family had owned since 1850s. But the legacy of biodynamic practices that he had pioneered in order to grow top-quality organic tea lives on.

Larger tea leaves with a sweet, malty aftertaste are ready for harvest

From the top of the ridge where we stay, it is a rocky drive downhill to

TEA CYCLE AND SEASONS

Darjeeling Tea is harvested in a precise seasonal cycle. After winter dormancy from end of November to February, the bushes come to life with tender leaves in mid-March. This first flush has a flowery bouquet,

the most expensive variant and eagerly awaited by connoisseurs the world over. By late May, the second flush leaves ooze a delightful muscatel fragrance from their brownish tips and are ready to be plucked. A tea

with pleasant astringency, and a crisp, fruity finish. In the rainy months of July and August, the plantations are thick with the woody aroma of the monsoon flush – the strongest Darjeeling tea with notes of smoke and

hay. After the monsoon, from early October, the larger leaves of the rich, earthy autumn flush with a sweet, malty aftertaste are the last harvest before the bushes go into hibernation for the winter.



A late afternoon round of second flush tea brewed to a tawny golden and paired with freshly baked scones is followed by cocktails on the verandah with house guests, where everyone goes for the glass of martini infused with Moonshine tea!



River Rangeet. We are now heading there, a bone-rattling drive on the unpaved road, snaking its way through the emerald slopes. The rains have lent a fresh, dazzling green to the mossy clumps of tea bushes all around us. The monsoon harvest is in full swing and women, sporting headscarves or colourful umbrellas, roam the hillside, nimbly plucking two leaves and a bud and tossing them into the wicker baskets on their backs. Our driver tells

us that manual plucking also plays a role in the flavour of Darjeeling tea — the use of hands ensures that the precise combination of two leaves and a bud is plucked, with no extra foliage.

Darkness descends gently on the valley as we return to our place, and it is a time travel to the planters' life. A late afternoon round of second flush tea brewed to a tawny golden and paired with freshly baked scones

is followed by cocktails on the verandah with house guests, where everyone goes for the glass of martini infused with Moonshine tea! Dinner is announced sharply at 8 and we indulge in tea-themed delicacies like chicken smoked with autumn flush, Oolong infused rice and a delectable panna cotta with masala chai sauce. As we retire to our rooms, a drizzle starts. I sleep off to the incessant sound of raindrops on the skylight above the rafters roof.

And we wake up to a glorious morning. Last night's precipitation has driven away the monsoon cloud cover, and the entire Kanchenjunga massif is resplendent in an other-worldly glow in the first rays of the sun. As I slowly savour my morning cup of Moonshine, marvelling at the majestic vista unfolded before us, I wonder if indeed Bertie and Banerjee are right - it is the proximity of the Himalayas that make Darjeeling tea the 'champagne' of all teas!

We retrace our route, bumping and grinding the way uphill, but our tryst with tea is not yet over. We make a brief visit to Cochrane Place, a 19th-century bungalow in the colonial hill station of Kurseong. Dhiraj Arora, a Kolkata-based entrepreneur, has lovingly restored the Raj-era bungalow and has revolutionised the classic Darjeeling cuppa with some quirky blends. In the tea salon at the corner of the dining hall of Cochrane Place, Dhiraj and his resident tea blender Laltu, whips up artisanal fusions—the pale golden first flush or the amber second flush brewed to perfection from the finest leaves from local tea gardens, blended with an assortment of spices and fruits.

From amid the delightful disarray of kettles, carafes, water heaters and tea jars in the salon, Laltu concocts three tea fusion shots. This is a tea tasting ceremony, with a contemporary twist!



The aromatic paan chai is interwoven with essence of betel leaves.

The first one is rose petal tea. The tell-tale notes of a high quality second flush oozing a strong muscatel flavour blends into the subtle essence of the shredded rose petals floating on top, both retaining their distinctive aroma. Next in line is the sweet-spicy fruit medley tea. The jammy sweet mix of strawberry, hibiscus flowers, apples and lemongrass lend a fruity texture, but this one fails to impress, because the medley has overwhelmed the mellow first flush used to make it. The third shot of paan chai wins

with its full-bodied flavour of second flush tea interwoven with intense notes of chopped betel leaf. The tastes of clove, cardamom, and fennel seeds linger on my palate long after the last swallow.

I have always considered myself a puritan when it comes to tea. But the complex chemistry of Darjeeling tea that can absorb the flavour of almost anything, can make strange tea concoctions as interesting, and as refreshing as the orthodox cuppa. 