

History Of Tea

Tea, the brew steeped in mystery and intrigue, has been around for centuries and it all began in China. In the year 2737 BC, the story goes that the Emperor Shen Nung, a scholar and herbalist, was kneeling beside a fire boiling water for purer drinking. A breeze blew the topmost leaves of a nearby tree into the pot. Shen tasted the beguiling beverage and proclaimed that this liquid was both delicious and invigorating.

And tea, officially mankind's favourite hot beverage and second only to water as humanity's most drunk liquid, was born.

Tea Story – India

India's tea story starts with a saintly priest named Bodhidharma.

Two thousand years ago, the founder of Zen Buddhism was in the fifth year of a seven year sleepless contemplation of enlightenment. Finding himself dangerously close to falling asleep, Bodhidharma snatched some leaves from a nearby bush and chewed them. He was immediately revived. Bodhidharma turned to these leaves – tea leaves – whenever he again felt drowsy and was thus, according to legend, able to complete his seven years of meditation.

Barely a century and half after its first crop, India is, today, the largest producer and consumer of black tea, with over two million people employed in the industry. 50% of all tea produced in India is grown in Assam. It is the largest black tea producing region in the world.

Tea Story – Japan

The first tea seeds were brought to Japan by the returning Buddhist priest Yeisei, who had seen their value in China for enhancing religious mediation. As a result, he is known as the "Father of Tea" in Japan.

Because of this early association tea in Japan has always been associated with Zen Buddhism. It also received early imperial sponsorship and spread rapidly from the court and the monasteries to the other sections of Japanese society.

Such purity of form and expression prompted the creation of supportive arts and services and even a special form of architecture (chaseki) developed specifically for "tea houses".

Tea Story – Europe

Tea reached Europe from China and Japan in 1610 when Dutch traders brought leaves back as a luxury item alongside spices and silks.

The British were introduced to tea in 1662 when Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza included a chest of tea in her dowry when she married Charles II. She was known as the First Lady of Tea.

Tea's importance as a global commercial product started with the founding of the East India Company in England. Created in 16th century under a charter from Elizabeth I to seek exotic riches, the Company had a monopoly on all goods entering Britain from outside Europe. This initially restricted tea to the tables of England's high society. Over time, sailors returning from the Far East

shared it with family and friends, and enterprising smugglers avoided the Company's monopoly and government tariffs by illegally importing.

Tea was soon being requested in London's COFFEE houses.

At the start of the 18th century, England imported 200,000 pounds of tea each year; by 1750, that figure grew to over two million. Tea replaced ale and gin as Britain's most popular beverage and spawned new industries, from tea gardens to English pottery and porcelain.

By the 19th century, the British Empire had helped make tea a daily drink as explorers and entrepreneurs set up tea plantations in India.

In Britain, tea integrated into society at all levels, and was thought to have reduced urban disease and fuel the Industrial Revolution.

Employers instituted a morning and afternoon "tea break" to compensate for long working hours.

Tea Story – Australia

Tea arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. By 1820 tea was the drink of choice, not reserved for the drawing rooms of the privileged, but enjoyed by all Australians. In early colonial times, the four imported staples were tea, sugar, wheat and flour – so everyone from servants to officers to convicts were able to sip on their favourite brew.

Early folklore speaks of swagmen roaming the countryside and sharing yarns over a cuppa beside remote campfires, and of cherished tea rations during colonial times. Swagmen and soldiers used to carry the leaves in their kit and the sundowner was rarely without his billy as he traipsed well-trodden outback routes.

Throughout Australia's history, tea has continued to be a drink for men and women of all classes and regions. It has inspired much art, poetry and song and features in Australia's unofficial national anthem, Banjo Paterson's Waltzing Matilda, as well as Victorian poet Keighley Goodchild's 1883 ballad While the Billy Boils.

Tea now evokes a sense of nostalgia, representing for many a time of togetherness and friendship. This was especially true during conflict, with Australian soldiers abroad mailed packets of tea to remind them of home, and as a comforting pick-me-up.