What Is the Story of Tea?

Tea is the most popular beverage in the world, and there are many customs related to how it is made, served, and drunk. Some like it black, and some like it green. Some add milk and butter, while others add spice and sugar.

Tea is poured into cups, bowls, and glasses. It is served for good health and hospitality. It is drunk at social events, formal ceremonies, and in bed. But no matter how, when, or why tea is served, it is a pleasure all around the world.

The history of tea goes back 5,000 years to ancient China. According to legend, the Chinese emperor Shen Nung was boiling water over an open fire, and some dried leaves from a nearby plant fell into it. The emperor drank it and found it refreshing. Soon all of China was enjoying tea. From China, tea was brought to Japan by a Buddhist monk. A few centuries later, tea drinking in Japan was raised to an art form in the Tea Ceremony. The Dutch brought tea from China to Europe in 1610. In the Netherlands, tea was a luxury and cost $100 a pound. Ladies from the best families had tea parties where they served each guest with cakes and 50 or more cups of tea! The first tea samples got to England between 1652 and 1654, where it became so popular that it soon replaced beer as England's national drink.

In Great Britain, drinking tea is not as ceremonial as it is in Japan, but tea still holds a high place in daily life. For the British, tea is the cure for a headache or a heartache. It seems anything can be fixed by a "nice cuppa tea." The British usually drink black tea with milk and sometimes sugar. When tea was first brought to England, it was served in a bowl, but many had difficulty holding the bowl by the base and rim without burning their fingers, so they poured small amounts of tea into their saucers to cool. The ladies and gentlemen then picked up their saucers and slurped up the liquid! To avoid this, a single handle was added to the tea cup around the middle of the eighteenth century. The custom of slurping tea from saucers eventually stopped, but still continues in parts of England and India. Soon another custom was started by one of Queen Victoria's Ladies in Waiting, the Duchess of Bedford. At that time, the British had two meals a day, breakfast and dinner. British had two meals a day, breakfast and dinner. During the long wait between meals the Duchess had a "sinking feeling," so she began to invite friends for an afternoon meal of small cakes,

sandwiches, and tea. Other ladies liked the idea and started to do the same. Later, there were two kinds of afternoon teas: “low tea” and “high tea.” High tea is served around five or six o’clock on a dining table (a high table) and is a rather large meal with hot dished, heavy sandwiches, and cakes. Low tea is served around 4 P.M. and consists of light cakes and thin sandwiches without crusts.

Americans didn’t drink a lot of tea. Americans associated tea with the British, with whom they fought the Revolutionary War, so they drank coffee instead. Today, Americans drink lots of tea, but about 80 percent of it is “iced.” Iced tea was born in 1904 at the St. Louis World’s Fair when an Englishman named Richard Blechynden wanted to promote Indian teas. His plan to serve samples of hot tea didn’t work out so well. That day the temperature was extremely hot, and everyone wanted cold lemonade and Coca-Cola. Blechynden immediately came up with an idea: he filled tall glasses with ice cubes and poured hot tea over them. The beverage was an immediate hit. Shortly after iced tea was invented, the tea bag was born. An American tea salesman named Thomas Sullivan gave away samples of tea in small silk bags. His customers put them in a cup and poured hot water over them. People thought it was a great idea, and later tea bags were made of cheaper paper filters. Today tea is more popular than ever in America, particularly if it’s conveniently available in bags, instant mixes, and bottles and cans—perfect for a society on the go.

Tea customs vary around the world. In Mongolia, tea is mixed with milk, butter, and grain—almost like a soup—and drunk from a bowl. Moroccans favor green tea, served with fresh mint and sugar in small glasses. Indians drink a spiced tea known as chai, made with hot milk, sugar, cinnamon, and cardamom.

No other beverage has such worldwide appeal. Tea soothes and refreshes, and in this busy world, gives us a moment to pause. For many, a morning without tea would be unthinkable. Not to offer tea to a guest would be rude. Tea holds a special position in our lives and traditions. It is so important that we can’t even imagine what we would do without it.