



Ceylon Tea

*Custodians of the Art of Making
Black Tea for 150 Years*

- AS SEEN IN -
TEATIME
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Text by Lorna Reeves / Photography by John O'Hagan



Sri Lanka, which lies just 19 miles off the southeastern coast of India in the Bay of Bengal, boasts an impressive legacy of tea production, which began in 1867 when it was a British colony known as Ceylon. Its success in tea came about largely because of misfortune in its coffee industry. Savvy businessmen like Scotsman James Taylor snapped up lands at low prices that were once home to productive plantations but that lay fallow because of a blight that obliterated the coffee bushes.

They planted them with tea bushes instead, which thrived in the island's tropical climate that allows a year-round harvest. During the ensuing 150 years, popularized by companies such as Lipton, Ceylon tea became a globally recognized brand—so much so that the name was retained even though the country gained its independence from Great Britain in 1948 and had come to be known as Sri Lanka by 1972.

Because of its unique geography of lush rainforests that are close to high mountain ranges, the teardrop-shaped island boasts seven major tea-growing regions, with temperatures dictated by elevation. Consequently, marvelous flavor variations in the teas are evident from region to region. Low-grown ones come from Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa, which are no higher than 2,000 feet above sea level. The teas from Kandy (where James Taylor first established production) and certain ones from Uva are considered midgrown because they are produced at elevations below 4,000 feet. At 4,000 feet and above, the regions of Uda Pussallawa, Dimbula, and Nuwara-Eliya yield the delicate, high-grown teas. Although the monsoon season is certainly key to the health of the tea plants, drought and wind can also have positive short-term effects. One of the best examples of this phenomenon comes from Uva, where strong, dry winds affect the chemistry of the leaves during certain times of the year to produce highly desirable infusions that hint of camphor.

Nationwide, tea is still harvested by hand—primarily by women, who typically pluck 30 to 40 pounds of fresh leaf during a six- to eight-hour workday. (A little more than 4 pounds of fresh leaf will yield 1 pound of finished dried tea.) To ensure fair employment practices and high-quality tea, the Sri Lanka Tea Board regulates the industry. Its “womb-to-tomb” social welfare system, according to board member Anil Cooke, provides workers and their families with free benefits, such as education (including uniforms and books), healthcare, housing, electricity, and water, in addition to the highest wages of any tea-growing nation.



(Below) A Radella tea plucker's harvest is weighed and recorded. (Above) At Findlays' Courtlodge Tea Estate in Nuwara-Eliya, fresh leaf is collected at the end of the day to be transported to the factory for processing into some of the most highly regarded Ceylon black tea.



(Top right on opposite page and left) The lush bushes at Radella Tea Estate are harvested for gunpowder green tea. (Right) Ceylon black teas are sold at the weekly auction in Colombo.



Although Sri Lanka has a landmass of only 25,332 square miles, it produces 17 percent of the world's black tea supply. “We are custodians of the art of making orthodox black tea,” says Anil, who, as a broker, works with various estates to sell their teas at the weekly Colombo auction, the largest of its kind. And while black teas are certainly the country's claim to fame, some producers, such as Lumbini Tea Estate, have begun experimenting with white, green, and oolong teas, including some handmade examples, like those pictured below. And Talawakelle's Radella Tea Estate is one of the few gardens committed to processing gunpowder green tea exclusively.

Some in the tea industry estimate that hundreds of people play a part in producing just one cup of Ceylon tea. “Tea is a way of life,” says Rajith de Mel, managing director of Van Rees Ceylon Ltd., not just for the growers, brokers, and exporters, but for the consumers worldwide who have fallen in love with the wonderful array of teas produced on this island and who look forward to sipping them for many years to come.



(Above) Broker Anil Cooke, center, shows Gerry Vandergrift of The Metropolitan Tea Company, left, and Brett Patterson of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, right, some of the black teas that are available at that week's auction. (Below) Trevin de Silva, a trader with Van Rees Ceylon who specializes in high-grown teas, and TeaTime Editor Lorna Reeves taste ones on which his company will be bidding.



When shopping for tea, look for the Ceylon Tea lion logo, which appears only on teas that are of 100 percent Sri Lankan origin and of the highest quality. For more information, visit the Sri Lanka Tea Board website, pureceylontea.com.



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