

Tea

RITUALS

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For as long as I can remember, my mother has put the kettle on for everything. First thing in the morning for the pre-breakfast cup.

Last thing at night to wind down a little before bed. Sometimes she'd just flick the kettle on as she walked past, out of pure habit. It steamed and puffed when people came over, almost automatically. When Nana came round, or the plumber needed refreshment, when parents dropped friends over, or the vet came to visit the horse; the moment anybody came

through the front door, the kettle went on and the tea came out.

After water, tea is the most consumed drink in the world and tea cultures zig zag the globe. While many of us differ on when or if to add milk, how long to let the leaves steep, or whether sugar and lemon are necessary, there is one thing all tea drinking nations agree on; it is never »just a cup of tea«. It is almost always a little piece of tradition, something passed down. It is a drink to sit down to with friends and neighbours and family. It is an offering, a connector, and a comfort.





There is perhaps no other country with which the tea association is so strong. As a nation, they are the greatest consumers of tea in the world, and one of the world's largest producers.

They were the world's largest producer until last century, when China overtook them. Most of what India produces, it consumes itself; India is

a nation of tea lovers. Germany-based Shivangi Verma, who hails from India, sums it up; »Tea is to India what probably wine is to France. For Indians, tea is not just a drink but a reason for families to sit together and cherish beautiful moments. Every evening, from the past 30 odd years, my mother has been welcoming my father back home from office with a refreshing cup of tea! It's the moment my father leaves everything from the office in the office, and sits and spends time with my mother, and of course the kids. Tea is served when we welcome guests to our home - not merely as a refreshment, but as an indication that you are welcome in our home and we would like to have you again.«

While many of us use teabags in our day-to-day tea preparation, wheeling out the loose leaf only for visitors, it isn't the case in India. »Indians don't understand the concept of binding tea-leaves inside tea bags. We prefer to boil water on the stove and add a bit of ginger/ cardamom/clove (or what the heck, add all three), and some milk, boil

and spoonfuls of tea-leaves. Brew it, smell it, experience it. The stove flame has to be high and low, low and high. Turn the stove off when you feel the tea is strong enough for your taste (you can probably judge that easily by the look of the tea). Cover with a lid and let all the flavours bind together. *The tea is ready!*«

TEA TO INDIA IS WHAT WINE IS TO FRANCE



England

The British first began sipping tea in the 17th century, courtesy of Portuguese merchants bringing it in from China.

Tea was expensive and exclusive and very much the domain of the wealthy. But the taste for tea grew swiftly, and before long, England had begun their own growing and production of the stuff in India, cutting out the middle man and toppling China's monopoly on the market.

Nowadays, a cup of tea is synonymous with the English, sitting alongside



such icons as the Queen, David Beckham and the stiff upper lip. A quick glance at any literature, artwork or historical document that came out of England post 1750, reveals a national obsession with tea, the preparation and consumption of which they dedicated any number of hours to. Tea even stretches to include meals that go beyond a quick cuppa. There is High Tea, in which one traditionally sits down to tea (with a fancy tea set) served with a full spread of small sandwiches and cakes; and Devonshire Tea, tea served with scones, clotted cream, and jam. Afternoon Tea is the general term for the pick-me-up snack in the afternoon, whether or not it actually involves tea.

While the English of days gone by may have perfected the elaborate tea party, these days most Brits flick the kettle on and reach for the PG Tips teabags. Of course, the addition of milk is almost a given; it is the question of whether to add it first or last, which can start brawls. A report published recently that suggested, with scientific backing, that milk should be added first, nearly brought England to its knees.

TEA WITH THE QUEEN

Tea is not just a drink in England, it is both a national pastime and a key piece of their identity. Or, as George Orwell put it, »one of the mainstays of civilisation in this country.«



Australia

Australia's own tea culture, which has developed over the past couple of centuries as a combination of the traditional British way and the more relaxed »needs must« attitude borne of living in the bush.

These days we have ditched both the billy and the tea sets in favour of the kettle, and we favour black tea, al-

though most of us have peppermint or green somewhere in the house. Many of us drink our black tea white – with milk – and we also aren't afraid to dunk our biscuits, particularly the rock hard Ginger Nuts. In the case of the classic Australian biscuit Tim Tam, one popular tradition is to bite off both ends and use the biscuit as a straw.

BOILING THE BILLY

56

European Australians inherited their love of tea from the British settlers who colonised the country in the 1700s.

Along with the first convicts, tea travelled from England to Australia on the First Fleet in 1788. But back in the days of early colonisation, there wasn't a great deal of fine china to spare, and save for a few, no one had the time or money to be laying out the full spread every time someone wanted a cuppa. Tea came to be made by the more intrepid, by boiling water over the campfire in a tin can – a billy. And so emerged



57





Taiwan

Taiwan is both a country of tea drinkers and tea growers, producing a great deal of the world's Oolong tea.

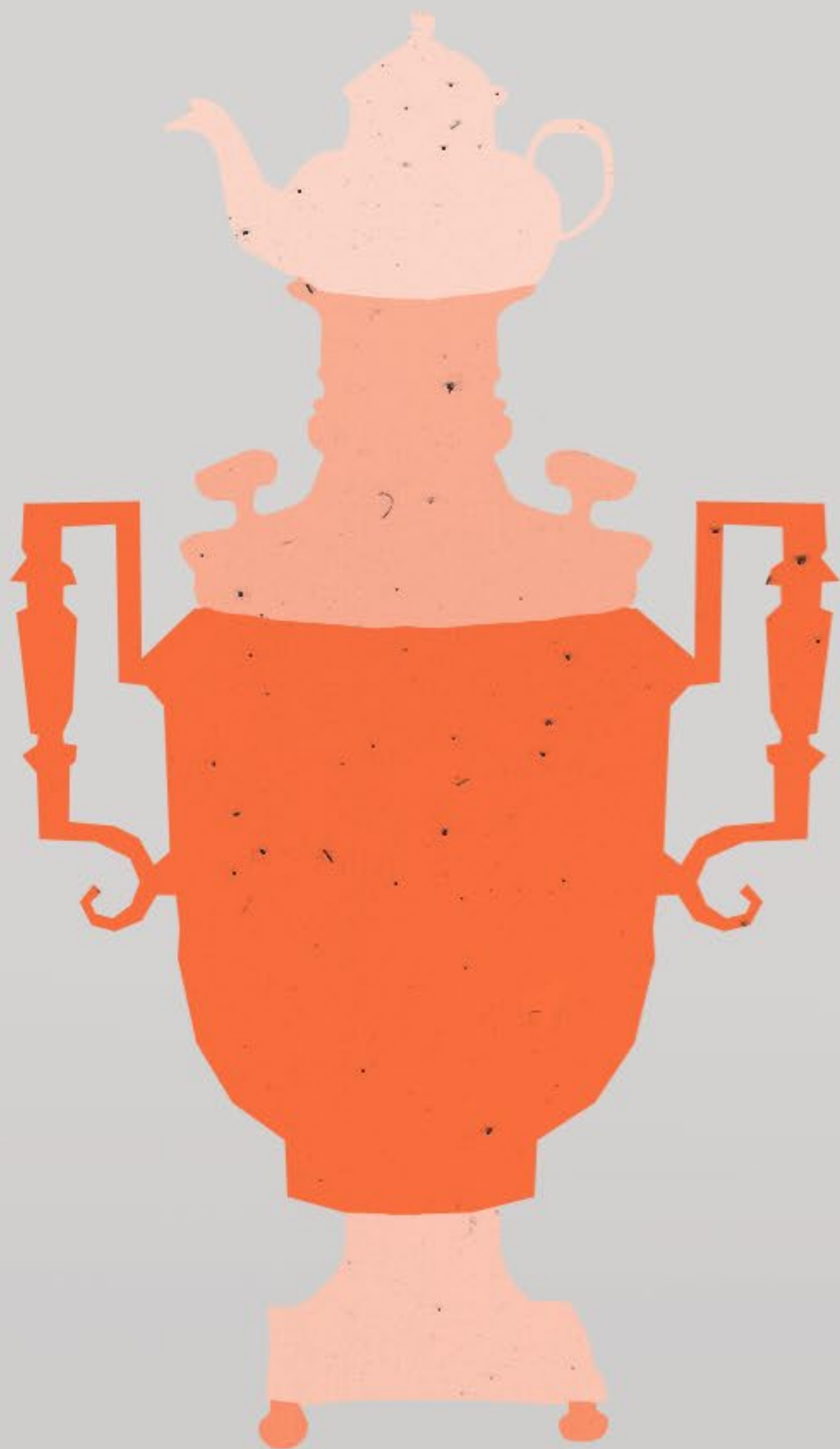
Interestingly enough, while Taiwan grows a huge range of green, oolong and black teas, and has a long, rich tea culture, many of the younger generation have started drinking black tea the Western way. Cherry, who grew up in both Taiwan and Australia, says »herbal tea was con-

OOLONG TEA THE WESTERN WAY

sumed in the old days and still is for medicine for a fever or a headache. Nowadays, young people still drink tea, but just the Western way, with sugar and milk. The majority of us drink either Oolong tea or black tea with sugar or milk.« Taiwan is perhaps most famous for

its Oolong tea, and the preparation of it is a key part of their tea culture. Most Taiwanese will use the Oolong leaves for three rounds of tea, before throwing them out and using fresh ones. Like so many rituals, this is one that can be especially observed when visiting »the oldies«.

Russia



Tea reached Russia in the 1600s after the Chinese Ambassador to Moscow at the time, presented Tsar Alesey Mikhaylovich with several chests of tea leaves.

Like in England, tea was for a time the domain of the wealthy and noble. But by the end of the 18th century, Russia was importing millions

I SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE MY TEA

of kilograms of tea from China, by camel caravan, so giving the famous Russian Caravan Tea its name.

Today, tea, usually consumed black, and often with sugar, is a staple of the

daily Russian diet, and typically had after a meal. As with other tea-drinking nations, a pot of tea is often at the centre of an invitation. As Vitalij, a Russian living in Germany, who still can't finish a meal without a cup of sweet, black tea, says, »being invited to have tea with a Russian is on the same level as being asked to dinner.« Taking tea with a Russian could involve a unique way of preparing your cup. Part of the Russian tea ritual includes brewing a strong tea concentrate in a small teapot, and then allowing everyone to add however much water they want.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, in his work, *Notes from Underground*, »I say let the world go to hell, but I should always have my tea.« Dedicated tea drinkers might argue, as long as there is tea, the world will never go to hell.