

# From medicine to popular refreshment

## Tea: A success story



The success story of tea is approximately 4,700 years old. Legend has it that Chinese Emperor Shen-Nung was extremely health-conscious, for which reason he had his water boiled before drinking it.

One day in 2737 BC – so the story goes – a stray tea leaf fell into his drinking bowl of freshly boiled water. The water darkened and spread a pleasant aroma. The emperor drank it and was thrilled by its flavor and invigorating effect – Chinese tea culture was born. From then on, the Chinese script included a new character, pronounced “tchai” or, depending on dialect, “tay,” “ta” or in the Amoy or Xiamen dialect “t’e,” the last providing the basis for the term brought to Europe by the Dutch in the 16th century: “Tee,” or “tea” in English.

### Tea as a means of meditation: The Japanese tea ceremony

From China, tea continued its triumphal march to encompass the entire world. Long before the Europeans discovered



it, however, tea had been influencing advanced civilizations in Southeast Asia for centuries. Japan was the first to be “conquered.” Today, the tea ceremony remains an integral element of Japanese culture.

It is uncertain whether tea also came to India from China. The first large-scale tea plantations in India, in any case, were established by English colonists in the 17th century.



### The East India Company

Nevertheless, tea did not become a common beverage in India for centuries. It took the English to change that: After Dutch traders had dominated imports of Chinese tea to Europe for more than a half-century, the British entered the tea business in 1669. Imports of Chinese tea rose from 32 kilograms in 1670 to 1,200 tons in 1711, not counting smuggled goods.

In the meantime, the first attempts had been made to establish tea plantations in the English colonies. These attempts were successful in the Indian highlands, and later on Ceylon and in Africa, when

Chinese cultivation and processing methods were adopted.

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Tea also left its noticeable mark along the trade routes connecting Europe with India and China. Whether in Persia or in the countries of the modern-day C.I.S. – especially in Russia – as well as in Turkey or in the Arab-influenced regions, indigenous tea cultures developed in many places.



### Tea in Europe: At first “bitter medicine” on apothecary shelves

Europeans first came into contact with tea around 1550 through Arab traders. Shortly thereafter, the Dutch began importing tea to Europe. Scarcely intro-

duced in the western world, tea was reputed first and foremost to possess healing properties. So tea originally ended up in the hands of the “pill mongers” as a “bitter medicine.” The apothecaries – in the 17th century more like alchemists than modern pharmacists – sold it along with their love potions, dried adders and all sorts of drugs and toxins. Only gradually did tea begin to establish itself as a popular beverage in Europe too.



#### The various tea plants

In spite of the vast number of tea varieties, there are only three different kinds of tea plant: On the one hand there is *Thea sinensis*, the Chinese tea bush, and *Thea assamica*, which originated in the Indian region of Assam on the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra River. On the other hand there is a hybrid strain, which is a cross of these two wild-growing varieties, that optimizes the characteristics of both plants and now accounts for the majority of tea acreage worldwide.

#### Already common knowledge in ancient China: Tea is healthful

It is, however, not just its flavor that makes tea so popular. Modern medicine also appreciates the healthy effects of tea. The caffeine in tea – an alkaloid and chemically identical to the caffeine in coffee – does not have a negative influence on the cardiovascular system, like coffee, but instead stimulates the

circulation and the metabolic processes in the brain. Scientific studies have shown that drinking tea both accelera-



tes and improves such intellectual processes as mathematics, reading, writing and memorization.

Green tea, in particular, is attributed to have a prophylactic effect against arteriosclerosis and cancer. It is also said to slow the aging process and contain a particular enzyme which prevents high blood pressure, to cite only a few of its beneficial properties.

#### A wide variety of flavors

Even though not apparent at first sight, tea is first and foremost a highly varied beverage. Today, tea comes in an incredible number of different taste notes, which in contrast to former times are often created by adding processed flavors. There are the taste notes of citrus or berries, as well as blossom notes,



such as jasmine. And, of course, there are herbal and spice notes, like the spice and holiday teas that are so popular during the colder seasons.

Each of these taste categories comes in many varieties. Tea owes its recent gains in popularity and its new consumer segments, particularly among the younger generation, to its many new taste notes, made possible by the state of the art of flavor production today. Nevertheless: In

Germany, for example, flavored teas account for barely an estimated ten percent of total black tea consumption.

#### Fruit and herbal teas highly successful on the German market

The flavoring trend, in any case, is also the reason for the growing popularity of fruit and herbal teas. Fruit teas now constitute more than one-half of the German tea market, for example. A small percentage is accounted for by medicinal herbal teas, and only around 40 percent by classical tea, including flavored blends. At the same time, the age-old classic, green tea, is winning more and more enthusiasts in its market niche, and specialties such as iced teas are developing into true best-sellers. On balance, the market shares of fruit and



herbal teas have steadily risen over the course of recent years, while black tea has stagnated.

Today's fruit and herbal tea market is largely characterized by a wide variety of additives which were largely unknown in the past, such as hibiscus, lemongrass or various exotic fruits. The quality of the unprocessed ware is the decisive selection criterion, since differences in color, acidity, oil content or oil composition can lead to extreme variations in the quality of the finished products. What is no less important, however, is that fruits, herbs and flavor have to form an harmonious composition.

