

## The Practical Herbalist -- The Story of Tea

The use of the tea leaf to make a beverage has a long history, especially in Asia. Tea was often the basis of many Herbal formulas, and was seen as drink of health. All traditional tea is made from the leaves of the same plant- *Camellia sinensis*, and in China is called cha. Cha has a long and interesting history as a beverage.

According to Chinese legends, in 3000 BCE Shen Nong “the Divine Cultivator” inventor of agriculture and herbal medicine was the first to make “tea”. Tea leaves fell into a pot of boiling water that he was preparing to use to cook his lunch. Rather than throw out the water he tasted it and found it pleasant. Shen Nong is credited with promoting tea and using it as medicine and as an antidote for some poisons.

In Japan, legends say that Bodidharma, the Indian monk who brought Zen Buddhism to Japan created tea trees. The stories tell that he meditated for nine years staring at a wall. He almost fell asleep, and in frustration, cut his eyelids off and threw them away. His eyelids grew into the first tea plants. It is said that that is why tea will help keep you awake. Some Chinese teas are actually called “eyebrow tea” because the dried leaves look like eyebrows.

Japan is also the source of the most ritualized style of drinking tea, simply called “Tea ceremony”. The Tea ceremony in Japan, was brought to prominence in the 16th century by Totomi Hideyoshi (a shogun). He used his tea master Sen no Rikkyu to establish ways of peace. He encouraged tea rooms, ceremony and art related to tea as a way to pacify the people and encourage peace and culture after a long civil war.

The popularity of tea made it very valuable. It was often an appropriate tribute gift to give to a king. During much of Chinese history, pressed tea cakes were used as currency. Books about tea were written. The most famous was “The Book of Tea” written by Lu Yu (733-804 BCE) who became known as the patron saint of tea. Lu Yu, (733-804 CE) was abandoned as a child on a river bank, adopted by Buddhist Monk Ji Ji of the Dragon Cloud Monastery. He tended buffalo for the monks, and wrote while astride a buffalo. He wrote many plays for a clown group as well as writing many books on tea.

Iced Tea was invented at the St. Louis Worlds Fair in 1904. Merchants selling Indian Black tea poured the tea over ice to improve sales during the hot weather. In 1908 a New York importer sent out tea samples in silk bags. Someone steeped the whole bag. Soon customers were demanding that all the tea come in bags, not just the samples.

Unfortunately tea is not as popular in the the U.S. as coffee and some other beverages. Traditional tea is processed in many ways creating subtle shifts of flavor. True tea lovers view the different teas like fine wine. Where the tea is grown and how it is processed makes a difference in how the tea tastes. Most of the tea in the supermarket is mass produced mid quality tea. A fine tea can be relaxing and be a part of slowing down and savoring life and company of friends. It is a social beverage that in its proper use fosters the calm, peace and harmony once sought by the great warrior Hideyoshi.

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