

FUTURE OF TEA AND TEA CULTURE

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Abstract

Tea consumption evolved in China from nutrition to medicine to meditation aid to a drink of leisure and culture. On the way the style of tea changed considerably from being eaten to a cooked brew to a refined whisked froth of powdered leaf tissue to steeped leaves.

Tea was introduced to Japan at all stages and the two latter has continued to the present with some Japanese improvements. Eventually, tea spread to Europe and the rest of the world, first as Chinese green tea and later as so-called black tea produced in other parts of Asia and Africa for consumption especially in Western countries and parts of Asia different from the traditional tea producing countries of the Far East.

While the consumption of both powdered tea and leaf tea and the accompanying culture has continued steadily in Japan over time, China shifted from one style to another with dynastic changes and eventually almost lost her tea culture completely during the Cultural Revolution. In the past 30 years we have seen a resurgence in tea cultivation, appreciation and culture in China, that in the last decade has come to play a central role in a general cultural renaissance of past dynasties. Inspiration for this development in tea comes mainly from Taiwan, where a particular Japanese aesthetic influence can be seen, as well as increasingly from Japan, which is the only place left with a fully developed powdered tea, Matcha, culture based on the practices of the Sung, however with Japanese characteristics and a fully developed philosophy and aesthetic based on traditional Eastern belief systems.

Since WW II, the Japanese have made an effort to introduce Matcha and the accompanying tea ceremony culture to most of the world including China. In the last two decades we have seen an increasing interest in the West for green tea, and the last decade especially for Matcha. The demand for green tea and Matcha is growing rapidly throughout the world, not least in the Far East, due to the recognised health benefits, mental positive effects and the culture that comes with it. At the same time, we see an increasing demand

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in the West for high quality Chinese leaf teas and accompanied with an interest in the culture that comes with it.

Most interestingly, there is a new trend to eat tea in the form of powdered Matcha in different ways. We thus see tea has made it full circle, and this new development is definitely here to stay.

Overall, there is a general and growing trend towards more and better tea consumption the world over, accompanied by an interest in traditional Eastern philosophy, culture and aesthetics often combined with a spiritual quest for greater meaning and purpose in life, peace of mind and appreciation of nature, the arts and our fellow beings in a, by tea, induced harmony.

Tea was originally a food. And indeed, it still is among some of the peoples in South West China who were the first to cultivate tea. For example, the Bulong, who live high in the deep tea mountains of Xishuangbanna on the border to Myanmar, and who are officially recognized to have grown tea for at least 1800 years. The Bulong daily pick fresh tender tea leaves for use in their daily meals, for example as a major ingredient in a salad, that may contain other greens from the jungle, in a delicious omelet and many other dishes. They also harvest tea leaves from up to eight hundred years old tea trees for the production of loose and caked Puerh tea - their most important cash crop. For their own tea consumption they use loose sun dried leaves, that are roasted slightly before they are steeped in a fairly big pot and drunk from simple cups.

Amazingly, after the millennia as a favourite beverage first of all in China and later in Korea and Japan for finally to reach the entire world, tea has made full circle and is now having a great come back as a food for mass consumption. Not as fresh leaves but in the form of powdered green tea, Matcha, that besides its original use as a drink, now appears as an ingredient, a flavouring agent, colouring agent and even as a major component of a large variety of foods, that first have hit the Far Eastern markets, but now increasingly appears in the European and American markets and elsewhere. This development was initiated by the introduction of Japanese Matcha and its distinct and highly developed culture to first the Western World and later the rest of the world followed by green leaf teas during the last 50 years and increasingly so in the past 30 years.

To understand why this is taking place, it is necessary to understand why tea became so popular and important long ago. Not only as a beverage, but for what the consumption of this beverage did for the cultural life of those societies. Because it is actually with the

same motivation and for the very same reasons that people again turn to tea.

Camellia Sinensis, the source of all true tea, has some properties that are very unique and distinguishes it from all other plants. Tea flush contains a wide variety of compounds like phenol, flavonols, amino acids, chlorophyll, carbohydrates, caffeine, minerals, vitamins, enzymes and much more. The polyphenols in tea flush ranges from 20% to 35%. Among them, the flavonols, in particular the catechins are the most important and occupy 60-80% of the total amount of polyphenols. It is mainly the catechins that are responsible for the good health effects of tea, though vitamins and other things also play a role, of course. Catechins are found in all plants, however in very small quantities. In a few like cocoa and the seeds of red grapes there is some more, but tea has far more than any other plants and is therefore our richest source for the catechins essential for maintaining good health.

Besides the health benefits from imbibing tea, tea contains two substances that have a mental effect. One is caffeine, that like in coffee works as a strong stimulant. The other is an amino acid, theanine, that is unique for tea and constitute 2% of dry weight. Theanine works directly on the central nervous system as a strong relaxant as well as in the brain promoting neurotransmitters like dopamine and others. Theanine counteracts the undesirable side effects of caffeine and is known to strengthen concentration of mind, improve memory and the ability to learn.

Even though all tea comes from the same plant, there are variations in the contents of the tea flush dependent on soil, climate and general growth conditions. However, more important for the final result, the processing of the fresh leaves causes a lot of complex chemical reactions, that dependent on the degree of oxidation will produce a variety of teas from green, which is least oxidated, to oolong teas oxidated from 20% to 80% and so-called black teas that are fully oxidated. By polyphenol oxidase catechins will produce two groups of compounds theaflavins and thearubigins, responsible for the red colour of black teas. Enzymatic, redox and pyrolytic reactions will furthermore produce hundreds of aromatic substances giving the great variety of aroma, flavour and colour in oolongs and black teas.

The ancients recognized early on the nutritional and especially the health benefits of tea. Tea was therefore in the beginning to a higher degree considered a preventive and curative medicine rather than a pleasurable beverage. Also, the mental effect of tea consumption was recognized early on and was of particular interest to Taoist recluses and Buddhist monks as an aid in their meditation. The mental effect of increased alertness while the mind remained very calm led to greater awareness, an appreciation of nature, the arts and a general openness and understanding of one's fellow beings and in due time

led to a whole culture developing around the drinking of tea.

In the pursuit of ever stronger effect, tea cultivation, processing and brewing went through a development from a boiled soup made on brick tea in Tang times to eventually becoming a powdered green tea whisked up to a frothy foam in the Sung dynasty. With this achievement the whole leaf was consumed in as pristine condition as possible for maximum effect. It was this tea that around year 1200 arrived in Japan together with Zen Buddhism and became the basis for what is known as Matcha and the highly developed culture surrounding its drinking.

The original motivation for drinking tea was thus first of all to maintain good health and prolong life. Secondly, tea was found to have a very desirable mental effect of simultaneous alertness and calmness that was conducive to meditation and the pursuit of the arts and refined culture. This has continued through the centuries of changing tea habits, cultures and countries of consumption. The effects of tea drinking has always been recognized and appreciated irrespectively of where and when.

The reason Japanese Matcha and green teas are now in ever increasing demand worldwide, is that the original compounds of the tea flush are best preserved in Matcha, that also has the highest content of theanine being grown with full shading. In infusions of black tea, we get at the most 9% of the catechins. In infusions of fine green teas we get at the most 30% of the catechins. However, in the full intake of the powdered green soft leaf tissue of Matcha we get close to 100% of the catechins plus all the other compounds, like all the caffeine and theanine as well as vitamin E, trace minerals and more, that are not water soluble, and therefore thrown out with the leaves.

If we take a look at recent developments and trends pointing to the future of tea and tea culture, we find different situations in different parts of the world. In China, after having lost almost everything in the Cultural Revolution, we have in the last 30 years seen a rapidly evolving production of ever better leaf teas of all kinds. We have had a Puerh boom and presently a black tea boom. Green teas and oolongs also remain favourites. The production of Yixing pots and all kinds of ceramics, iron and silver kettles and other paraphernalia besides tea furniture and a distinct simple tea dress code is expanding by the year. As for tea ceremony, a lot of inspiration has been taken from Taiwan, where a distinct style has been developed based on the Ming traditions preserved in Japan and strongly influenced by Japanese aesthetics. Most recently, there is a clear trend towards a revival of Sung style whisked tea and the corresponding preparation ceremony, with copies of original utensils, appropriate behaviour and even Sung style costumes. At Jing Shan

temple in Zhejiang, for example, they have very successfully recreated the Sung style powdered tea that when whisked produce a rich white foam and expect this to be embraced by more and more people. Many travel to Taiwan to study and an increasing number of young people now flock to Japan to study everything from traditional tea architecture and garden design to flower arrangement, incense and not least tea ceremony for both the powdered Matcha and leaf Sencha. This is part of what I personally see as a Chinese Cultural Renaissance, with a revival of past glories, arts and crafts, music, a return to the use of traditional characters, etc. as well as the rapid re-emergence of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and general traditional values. Tea plays a central role in this development and will no doubt continue to do so in an ever increasing degree.

The situation in Japan is quite different. The traditional cultures surrounding Matcha and Sencha are being upheld by their respective schools of tea ceremony. However, with a rapidly ageing population that grew up with green tea and a very Americanized youth going for coffee, Coca Cola, other soft drinks and pet-bottle tea, there is a shrinking market for green tea. Japan has also seen an influx of European tea merchants and their Western establishments offering flavoured teas as well as a big consumption of oolong teas based on produce from both Taiwan and the Mainland as well as a smaller emergence of a market for fine Chinese teas. Fortunately, there is also a growing section of youth interested in traditional culture and experimenting with new ways of tea based on the traditional ways. This is a very positive and welcome development.

In Singapore and Chinese strong holds in Malaysia, there is both a traditional tea culture and those, who seek new ways. Teaching of tea culture is also going strong. Indonesia has a distinct tea culture of her own, but besides new small tea farmers trying to raise the quality, not much is happening. The same can be said for India and Sri Lanka. Thailand has an emerging tea production in the North, but no developed tea culture.

There is, however, a growing interest for fine teas in Europe and in America. This has in particular been spurred by Japanese Matcha and green leaf teas, but also fine teas from Taiwan and the Mainland. It is first of all an increasing mistrust of the food industry and to some extent big pharma that has given rise to a tendency to take nutrition and health issues seriously with an increasing demand for natural and health promoting foods. Green tea and especially Matcha comes strongly in here, and the falling demand in Japan is more than compensated for by the insatiable demand in the Western world for these teas. But it is not only for health reasons genuine Matcha is in demand. The failure of Western materialistic culture with its deep dualistic world view to provide meaning and happiness

has created a spiritual vacuum, that many try to cover by turning to Eastern traditions, like yoga, meditation, Zen and the like. Here Matcha also appeals with its accompanying highly developed culture which is embraced by an increasing number of especially younger people. We thus see, that the motivation to drink tea is the same today as it was in the past - for health reasons and for peace of mind in a culturally beautiful setting.

Genuine Matcha was and will continue to be drunk in Japanese tea ceremonies, traditional or contemporary in novel settings, but whatever the style, and as in the past, as a refuge from the hustle bustle of everyday life, where one can enjoy nature and the arts and not least contemplate the meaning of life with fellow minded people and enjoy peace of mind. Genuine Matcha is not only drunk in Japan, but increasingly around the world, not only in the traditional tea ceremony, but more and more as an invigorating and health preserving supplement to a healthy diet. Matcha is also used directly for its medical properties to control different medical issues, otherwise difficult to address and even to cure serious diseases.

However, something entirely new and unprecedented has come around in the last few decades, and more and more so. Beginning with Matcha ice cream and chocolate and expanding into bakery, all kinds of confectionery, creams, toffees, candies, cookies, condiments, whatever one can imagine, we even have Matcha cup noodles, Matcha liqueur, Matcha beer and other drinks with added Matcha. There is Matcha soap and cosmetics, incense etc. Every day we see new concoctions using Matcha here in Japan. In recent years this has led to the writing of Matcha recipe books in Japanese and in Chinese translation. Most recently, the prestigious Japanese magazine *Kateigaho International* in English has devoted 12 pages to Matcha including detailed instructions in how to whisk light, fragrant Matcha and rich, thick Matcha as well as 13 illustrated recipes for the eating of Matcha in various ways. This trend has also little by little spread to China and Korea in the past ten years as well as the rest of the world. There is a huge and fast growing craving for Matcha world wide due to the belief in the beneficiary qualities of green tea for both physical and mental health. This development is followed by an increased interest in the culture surrounding tea, not only Japanese tea, but also Chinese tea, especially in the Western world, but also elsewhere.

Now, the question is, where does all this so-called Matcha come from? The traditional Matcha growing areas in Japan, in particular Uji, which is producing the foremost Matcha for ceremonial drinking, has in no way the capacity to meet this demand. This so-called Matcha used in the vast majority of new products is not proper Matcha at all, but ground

up green teas of non de-script origin, some Japanese sencha, but also green teas from elsewhere that have not been grown and processed the correct way. China has, for example, an enormous production of very unpalatable so-called Matcha sold cheaply to whoever for whatever. Vietnam also has a large production of green tea to enter into what seems to be genuine Japanese products. And so forth. This development has, of course, created a crisis in the Japanese genuine Matcha production community and a dispute within the Japanese Tea Manufacturers' Association[†]. Whether we in the future will see the word Matcha reserved for the genuine thing and everything else called powdered green tea, we do not know. However, whatever happens, the fact remains that tea has become a food for mass consumption, giving more access to the valuable compounds in tea for a larger number of people, than mere infusions can provide, and that in itself is a good and positive thing.

From my own observations and experience I can only conclude, that it is exactly the same motivations that brought people to tea in the past that are bringing them to tea today - A quest for health and longevity and for the peace of mind experienced in a real tea ceremony. With a growing awareness, tea and its surrounding culture has therefore as bright a future as it had in the past, and tea will continue to be the most important beverage, and now also as a food, in the world.

[†] As of May 2017 the Japanese Tea Manufacturers' Association has announced a change in the rules defining Matcha. For a green tea to be called Matcha, it should not only be ground to a fine powder, but the tea bushes must have been shaded for 2 to 3 weeks before harvest. This definition is expected to be adopted by ISO.

