

Though most of us in Canada think of the British traditions when we consider tea drinking, the beverage and the ceremonies surrounding its consumption had their origins in China. As early as 1500 to 1046 BC in Yunnan province during the Shang Dynasty, tea was a medicinal drink. It was drunk for its own merits only when it spread to Sichuan province.

An early legend concerning the origin of tea as a beverage states that Emperor Shennong, who had decreed that all his subjects must boil their water before consuming it, had some tea leaves drop into a cup of freshly boiled water he was consuming in the garden. The taste so impressed him that it soon became a popular beverage. Many believed it had both medicinal and restorative properties.

From China tea eventually spread around the world. It spread to Japan in the sixth century where it became a drink of the religious classes. It did not make an appearance outside of the far east until the early 17th century when it was brought to Amsterdam from China. By the 1660's it had made its appearance in Britain but its consumption was confined largely to the aristocracy. By 1750 it had become the national drink.

In China the rituals surrounding the drinking of tea are known as Gong Fu. The tea master is considered an artist and may spend much time perfecting a unique style of water pouring and tea preparation. Oolong is the tea generally used and the steeping time is about 30 seconds. The tea master pours continuously around the prewarmed cups so that each person will have the same strength and volume of tea in the cup.

The Japanese tea ceremony is known as Cha-no-yu and survives today as an honoured tradition. Humility and respect are the keystones of the ceremony. Because it can never be exactly duplicated, attention is paid to every detail. The movements of the ceremony are simple and minimal. Matcha, made from ground green tea leaves is used in the ceremony.

Tea was introduced to Russia in the 17th century. The centerpiece of every Russian home was the samovar. The samovar is a decorative urn of copper or

silver designed to hold a large quantity of water. The water is continuously heated so that tea may be served quickly and at any time. A small pot containing a concentrate of tea is kept warm on top of the samovar. When tea is desired one adds a small amount of the tscheinik (tea concentrate) to a cup or pot and dilutes it with hot water from the samovar. Russians prefer their tea smoked and traditionally sip it through a sugar cube held in the mouth.

First introduced to England in the mid 1600`s, tea was served in coffee houses which catered only to men. As the cost declined and more people became able to afford the leaves, tea became a common beverage served at home. Anna Russell, the Duchess of Bedford is credited with introducing the concept of afternoon tea. It was her solution for dealing with hunger between breakfast, which was early, and dinner, which was usually served late in the day. Those with less romantic thoughts believe that afternoon tea was a way to increase the number of hours workers could be kept productive.. The stimulants in tea coupled with sweets gave workers energy to finish their long work days. Since water for tea requires boiling water borne diseases such as cholera, typhoid and dysentery were kept somewhat at bay.

Today afternoon tea is a well established tradition, often enjoyed for the same reason that the Duchess of Bedford discovered. Tea sandwiches or finger sandwiches are easy to handle and are consumable in two bites. The bread is generally white, no crusts, thinly sliced and buttered. The cucumber tea sandwich is considered the signature tea sandwich.