

India Gives Uganda Tips on Tea

Tea. It brightens life at the office, cools the farmer after a hot morning's work in the fields and goes down well with an African sunset. In fact, tea is drunk so abundantly in Uganda that it is easy to forget the intricate process that brings the cup to life.

To learn more about its mysteries, I travelled to India, spiritual home of fine teas, to meet Dolly Roy, India's first professional woman tea taster, owner of its first tea boutique, and a formidable expert on the subject of tea. Sitting in her lamp-lit tea shop in Calcutta, surrounded by tea chests, kettles, and paper lanterns, she discusses the magic brew and her attachment to it.

"Calcutta is tea mad; and I am a tea-total person!" she announces. "I grew up in Darjeeling and studied in school there. Seeing tea being tasted at the garden left a lasting impression on me." She refers to the vast plantations of tea that spread like an emerald cloak around the little town of Darjeeling, in India's North-East, nestled in the lower foothills of the Himalayan mountain range.

Darjeeling

While tea was accidentally discovered by the Chinese emperor Shen Nung in 2737 BC, it was the British East India Company that imported Chinese tea bushes into India in the 1830s. These delicate bushes formed the basis for Darjeeling teas, which, according to Roy, "are the best in the world." What makes them that way is "the soil, the elevation, the climate, the rainfall. This tea is grown at 7000 feet above sea level; there's no other place in India where you have teas grown at that altitude." These climatic and geographical factors give the tea a distinctive flavour. In addition, Roy notes that "they have very small leaves; and they pluck them every two or three days, which makes them very succulent and enhances the flavour."

The distinction of Darjeeling tea is best understood when it is drunk, but Roy tries to describe the flavour anyway. "It's Delectable! Not acidic at all", she observes. "Darjeeling is divided into four seasons: spring, summer, monsoon, autumn. During the first season, which is spring, the teas are slightly astringent because they have less moisture in them."

"But as the season progresses," she continues, "particularly during the second 'flush' when you get the best quality, the tea leaf has more moisture. So it can be rolled better. So you get a much better flavour. You get a softer, rounder, mellower, aromatic tea."

Tea is tricky

The terminology of tea is often more difficult to appreciate than the taste, so Roy explains that 'flush' refers to "the time of picking, or plucking, of the tea. The flushes are distinctive by themselves because of the seasons [in which they grow]". Besides that, there are lots of grades of tea. You have 'leaf teas', 'broken teas', 'fan teas' and 'dust teas'; they're broken up into various grades. So that gives a huge variety." The size of the tea leaf also affects the flavour. The size,

also known as 'orange pekoe', reveals whether the tea is 'orthodox' i.e. with large, unbroken leaves; or 'CTC' i.e. Crush-Tear-Curl, where the leaves are crushed, torn and curled in the manufacturing process, leading to a grainy tea. Orthodox tastes better; but while a kilo of CTC will make 500 cups, orthodox provides just 250.

Indian teas are marked by their huge variety, with tea bushes grown across North and Eastern India and in the Southern highlands.

Although India drinks 95% or nearly 700 million kilos per year of its tea locally, it ranks amongst the world's top tea exporters (roughly 200 million kilos annually), with the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and Middle East being the biggest buyers.

Ugandan tea

Roy points out that this holds important lessons for a tea growing nation like Uganda. Acknowledging the differences in size and production capacity of India and Uganda, she believes that "the quality of Indian tea" is what makes it a winner above others. "Today there's only one word for tea and that's 'quality'," Roy opines. "Quality is what pays, and nothing else pays. Common teas have no place in the world."

Uganda produced 44.9 million kilos of tea in 2007, of which 41.6 million were exported through sale at the Mombasa auctions, at an average price of US\$1.34 per kilo. Though it is mainly grown in the Rwenzori highlands where the right cool temperatures and soil types prevail, Uganda mainly manufactures CTC tea. In effect, the manufacture process compromises on its taste. "The CTC teas are sold through the Mombasa auctions. Most of the tea that's drunk in India is CTC tea. But we have dual production in India; where we manufacture both CTC and orthodox teas."

The ability to process differently to obtain superior grades of taste enables Indian teas to achieve higher standards, reach export markets and obtain better prices.

To improve Ugandan teas, Roy feels they should be "like 'Assam' which is strong, full-bodied, with brightness", referring to the brew obtained from tea bushes indigenous to North-East India. "Kenyan teas have the brightness, but they don't have the strength of the Assam, and that's where they fail." Managed value addition through careful processing can, in the long run, benefit the Ugandan tea industry.

Women

When Dolly Roy started out as a professional tea taster in 1978, she entered a "male chauvinist pig world." A Calcutta-based tea company took her on "as a risk. They said if I can't make it to being a tea taster, I'd be an accountant! The fear factor was tremendous." She succeeded and went on to become the world's first woman tea auctioneer and worked in all 70 of India's tea auction centres. In 1988, she pursued her dreams to open her own tea boutique, Dolly's: The Tea Shop, which today serves over 40 hot and fifty-fifty iced types of teas, and receives hundreds of customers daily. Supported by an all female staff ("I'm a great feminist, so I like hiring female

staff”) she epitomises successful entrepreneurship. To Ugandan businesswomen who also dream big, she simply advises, “Go ahead and do it!”

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