
KEEPIN' IT LOCAL

By Karin Edmondson

Tea is not only the antidote to drowsiness but one of the ways whereby man can return to his source.

—Lu-yu, Taoist poet, T'ang Dynasty 8th century AD



Photo courtesy of Tay Home

Tea in the United States is commonly relegated to the ranks of ‘just another beverage’ along with coffee, soda, juice, vitamin waters, mineral waters, caffeinated waters, lattes, espressos, macchiatos. Lipton, the old standby, ubiquitous in diners, restaurants and gas stations through the country, was named after Sir Thomas Lipton, a Glaswegian who blended the tea now bearing his name. Like most other national brands, Lipton is part of a giant global conglomerate: Pepsi-Unilever. Chances are that most tea in the United States is drunk in iced form—especially during the summer and probably also owing to Sweet Tea, that Southern tradition of endowing black tea with massive quantities of white sugar. New York State residents might have noticed the proliferation in recent years of Harney & Sons Tea, a gourmet tea company started 25 years ago by very American John Harney at the tender age of 53. Even with Mr. Harney’s courageous foray into tea—a beverage that has been consumed by traditional cultures for hundreds of years—Americans do not have any sort of ceremony around tea unlike, say, the English with High Tea or Afternoon Tea or the Japanese and their meditative Tea Ceremonies.

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Here’s some interesting tea lore: according to Anthea Bell’s translation of Maguellone Tousant-Samat’s 1987 *The History of Food*:

- 14,000 cups of tea a second are drunk in the world today.
- The French average a cup and a half per month per inhabitant.
- The Italians average three cups a year.
- Like wine, tea has its crus, poetically called gardens.
- Tea did not become popular in China until the 6th century and at first, it was chewed, as cakes of pressed leaves. During the Ming Dynasty tea became an infusion.
- The Japanese tea ritual has a code, even laws: the drink of immortality has to be brewed in accordance with a very precise ceremonial, making each mouthful and each gesture both an initiation and a poetic ecstasy.
- Although coffee was the favorite drink of rich and poor alike in France, Italy and Spain, tea was a privilege of the upper classes, especially in France where tea drinkers had the reputation of being intellectuals, idlers or fashionable folk and above all, the ladies.

• In Arab countries offering tea is a delicate expression of hospitality, given to all visitors in the most primitive of tents of the most wretched of shacks in the shanty towns just as it is in the most fabulous of palaces complete with ornate marble work and mosaic-patterned walls. Sometimes, the host may want to honor his chief guest by asking him to make the tea.

Tay Tea/Tay Home

My first encounter with the magic of Tay Tea occurred at Peekamoose Restaurant in Big Indian. Chef Devin Mills' dessert menu listed something called Muse Tea—a tisane blended with 100% organic botanicals: lemon verbena, peppermint, spearmint, lemon grass, lavender, rose petals and lemon balm. Then, at the Pure Catskill's 2007 Holiday Market hosted by Peekamoose, there was a whole new slew of Tay Tea blends to choose from. My sister, a rose lover, received Kyoto: Japanese Green Sencha with cherry blossom rose petals; and my friend Neil, a dapper gourmand with a palate for sweet, received Better Than Sex, a Roobois blend with bits of Belgian dark chocolate and peppermint. Tay Tea's Twiggy (aged oolong and chrysanthemum flowers) and more recently, Duchess' First Love (Earl Grey blended with Roobois and notes of caramel) are staples in my pantry. Twiggy—named after the rail thin '60s fashion model—contains Oolong, a lightly caffeinated tea long thought to help lower cholesterol, and chrysanthemum flowers, believed to aid in headache relief. It's a perfect tea for relaxing and healing. Duchess' First Love is almost like drinking dessert—the caramel notes are deep and sweet, a lovely, heady experience combined with the bergamot notes of Earl Grey tea. The description of the tea suggests that it is "perfect for a crisp Autumn or Winter day" but really it's a terrific way to drink dessert anytime.

"If you drink any more of my Twiggy, you will disappear!" jokes Nini Ordou-

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badi, tea blender and founder of Tay Tea when I walk through the doors of Tay Home, her shop in Andes. I assure her I drink Twiggy regularly for health reasons and not in order to lose weight, which is another added benefit of Oolong tea. While I settle onto one of the three stools in front of the tea counter, she hands me a freshly brewed cup of her signature blend, Persian Rose, as a welcome. Nini marvels at the conundrum of some people: how they think that drinking Twiggy while still consuming unhealthy, high fat foods will work miracles. Tay Tea is about the whole experience of tea, not about segregating or fragmenting the tea, even if it is important aspects like health or taste. "Tea is about sympathy and friendship. Tea and hospitality are sisters." Nini Ordoubadi started her company Tay Tea in 2003 and opened her teashop in Andes soon after. "Tea saved my life," she says matter of factly. "I was in a difficult place in my life and tea gave me relief, a path of solace with friends. A whole new life opened up to me, a new community of friendships that have filtered through my shop." Indeed, the wisdom that when one is on the right path, the going is effortless holds true in Nini's case. All four young women that work with Nini in her tea business met her by chance, and discovered that they shared a common interest: Tea. Starting with her manager Hillary Trelease (Miss Tealeaves) or Misty, Claire Gohorel, aka Gracious Plum and Amber Telian (Blossom). "Our latest recruit, Cathy Govelitz (Tea Fan), who just relocated from New Jersey to settle in a nearby town, just drifted into the shop one fall day, sat down to tea and was working with us the next week!" As Nini says "I feel blessed that I never had to place an ad to find any one of these amazing and talented women who have been so vital to my business. We just kind of found each other in an effortless way which is an absolute joy."

A former interior designer and stylist, Nini's reincarnation as a tea blender is extension of her creative spirit. Each blend is a work of art like an abstract painting, so each person can read their own stories in the tea. Each blend (starting with the names) has her unique point of view, a creative infusion of her vision. Nini's ancestry is Persian, and like other traditional cultures, tea is more than just a beverage, it is deeply embedded in the daily culture and philosophy of her people. "The custom of serving tea to our guests is a vital part of the tradition of sharing who we are, of creating union, empathy and peace with others. Drinking a cup of tea with another person is, in essence, an act of opening our hearts. It provides nourishment, creates an instant connection with another human being. This hospitality, this connecting with others is at the core of my philosophy for creating my artisanal tea blends and having my tea shop."

The art of tea blending runs in Nini's family: her great grandfather, grandmother and great aunt all created their own tea blends. "I guess I inherited the tea blending gene." In Eastern cultures tea has a deep significance: offering a first cup means hello. The second cup, friendship and the third cup means, you

are family. (Nini highly recommends reading *Three Cups of Tea*, an inspirational book by Greg Mortenson.) Tay Home and the shop online currently has 18 of Nini's signature tea blends and two more—entirely organic and fair trade—are about to be offered to customers. Wild Woman is a black tea blend with blueberries, black currants, hibiscus, elderberries and cornflower petals. The tea is light and effervescent and fruity. Queen Nefertiti is an organic black tea blend with pomegranate, Madagascar vanilla and calendula petals. This blend is a bit richer, not as diaphanous as Wild Woman. Nini's tea blends are categorized as black tea, green tea, rooibos and herbal tea blends. Also helpfully listed is the caffeine strength. For example, the green tea and black tea lines are all listed as caffeinated while herbal and rooibos tea blends are caffeine free. The teas are packaged in 4-ounce tea tins (red, black and silver) with spare and elegant labels custom designed for Tay Tea by a long-time friend and talented designer Peter Hofmeister. Nini carries Peter's beautiful line of silver hand-made jewelry at her store. In addition to Nini's signature blended teas, Tay Home also stocks single note teas "for the purists and also because not everyone wants a blend all the time. Some days, I enjoy waking up to English Breakfast—a very clean tea."

In addition to selling her teas retail from her teashop and online from her website, Nini has in the past four years developed a strong wholesale tea business and supplies 40-plus restaurants, teashops, spas and hotels with her specialty tea blends. She also regularly attends the major wholesale trade shows that are held in New York City every year and publicly speaks as a Tea Blender and Expert at various trade shows. Nini has also created a special niche for herself as a custom tea blender for clients who want to develop their own tea brands. Recently she created a collection of artisanal teas for Henri Bendel in New York and the four new stores that they opened nationwide.

Nini is a self-taught tea connoisseur. "I am a tea lover. I am not a tea master. A tea master is someone who dedicates a lifetime to tea education, culture and ceremony. The Path of Tea is deep and wide. I am simply an enthusiastic explorer on this path." At Tay Home, discover Nini's custom blended teas, single note teas and lovely tea accoutrements—like several types of tea pots in different price ranges. Her personal favorite brewing vessel is a glass teapot (and warmer), made in Germany that she recommends for using everyday to brew all kinds of tea as the different flavors do not cling to glass and you can see what is brewing (a beautiful added bonus). The shop also specializes in carrying fabulous hostess gifts like bamboo serving trays, locally made pottery, acacia wood dishes, and handmade beeswax candles from Susan Riesen. Every season Nini makes sure that the decor at Tay Home changes to reflect a different theme that inspires. Some past themes: Milk Weed (all white decor), Tibet, Birds and Leaves of Grass. Next season when she reopens the store the theme will be "Africa South," inspired by her recent

trip to South Africa and her visit to a Rooibos tea plantation.

A special offering of teas are available in the store or on line for Valentine's Day, including Tay Tea's Tea Blooms—hand sewn rosettes of premium green tea with a Globe Amaranth or Jasmine flower center that delicately unfurl when steeped in hot water. In ancient Greece the globe Amaranth was considered a symbol of everlasting love. Obviously, a glass tea pot is the optimal choice for a tea bloom, so that the entire process of brewing and steeping tea involves beauty, and is a progression to the final act of drinking the tea. Each Tea Bloom makes two pots of fragrant green tea or fifteen cups of tea. Also available are gift boxes with eight selections of Tay Tea blends. Wake Up includes black tea and green tea blends and green tea blooms. Relax is a mélange of caffeine-free herbal and rooibos tea blends. Nini personally recommends trying her Lover's tea blend for Valentine's Day. An aphrodisiac tea blended with wild crafted Persian saffron, rose petals, hibiscus and marigold petals in a base of herbal red rooibos tea, it's sure to put you and your loved one in an amorous mood!

And the name Tay Tea? Tay is the oldest word in Mandarin Chinese for tea. "Following the Path of Tea has given me a vision of where my life can go: pause, balance, accountability and creating a special oasis of peace and restoration through this ancient and healing ritual which is simply sharing a cup of tea with the world."

Tay Home and Tea Shop is located at 72 Main Street, second floor, Andes. Please refer to www.taytea.com for store hours and latest news. The online shop is open year round (Paypal accepted) and shipping of teas and teaware is on Fridays only. Tay Home will be open for Valentines Day and President's Day from February 14 to February 16. For more information, call Tay Home and Tea Shop in Andes at 845 676 4997 or in New York City at 212 741 9008. You can also e-mail nini@taytea.com.

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