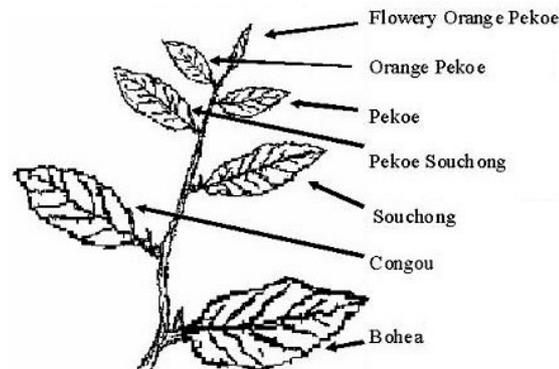


Tea

The tea plant, native to China, is one of some 300 species of evergreen shrubs and trees making up the *Camellia* genus. Many species are grown as ornamentals for their glossy foliage and beautiful flowers but *Camellia sinensis* (the tea plant) is grown primarily to produce the beverage tea, probably the most universally consumed beverage of all time. Over the years, tea has played a part in just about every aspect of our lives: culinary, medicine, history, economic, politics, literature, arts, custom and manners etc., even in the illicit 'rendezvous'! Since its discovery, tea has been an inspiration for the artists, writers, politicians and the artisans creating all different types of tea utensils and all manner of packaging and presentation of the produce!

Many legends surround the tea tree. One is that the Chinese emperor Shennung was extremely concerned with cleanliness and purity to the point that he took pain to make sure that his drinking water was boiled fresh every time he drank it. One day, leaves from a branch burning under the pot were caught by the wind and tossed into the churning pot; a marvellous aroma overtook the emperor, who was standing by. He liked what his nostrils took in and soon tasted some of the water as it cooled down. The entire experience was so pleasurable to him that he ordered his subjects to search for more branches of the same quality and to cultivate the tree that is known to us today as the tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*). Another legend says that tea comes from Buddha's eyelids, which he cut off and hurled to the ground because he fell asleep while meditating! He was mortified and wanted to make sure that it would never happen again... Where his eyelids fell, tea bushes arose, now we have the beverage tea to bestow alertness.

The tea plant is an evergreen shrub - or occasionally a tree - that grows mainly in tropical and subtropical climates, and - if allowed to grow freely - can reach a height of 15m, but to facilitate tea picking, it is pruned regularly so that it does not grow higher than 1.5m. The plant is now cultivated widely in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Sri Lanka, East Africa, Latin America and some parts of Russia. There are close to 350 different cultivars producing different qualities and therefore different fragrances and tastes. Tea plants have white flowers, 2.5cm across, with yellow stamens borne in winter followed by capsules containing large oily seeds; however, when grown for tea producing, they are kept trimmed and flowers are rarely seen.



All tea comes from the same plant. The specific variety of tea plant and the way the leaves are processed after harvesting determine the type of tea that is created. The first picking (early in spring) yields the best quality, while subsequent pickings yield progressively inferior qualities. In picking, the downy young bud (Pekoe, from the Chinese word *pa ko*, meaning white down) and the top two leaves are plucked from each stem. In grading, the smaller and younger the leaves are, the better the quality. Different grades are: orange pekoe (so called because the tip of the bud is yellowish-orange), pekoe (shorter leaves without buds), and pekoe souchong (souchong is from the Chinese *siaochung*, referring to small-medium size of leaves). After picking, the leaves are cured to provide the

teas sold commercially that we all know. The major types are: Green, Oolong and Black.

Green tea is unfermented. The fresh leaves are dried immediately after picking. They are treated by steam or dry heat to inactivate the enzymes and to prevent oxidization. In **black tea**, the leaf buds and leaves are let to wither for a day or more until they are soft, then they are rolled, getting bruised during the process, and left to ferment. During fermentation the enzymes convert some of the chemical compounds, which give black tea a different colour and flavour to green or oolong tea. **Oolong tea** is semi fermented, intermediate between green and black tea. **Brick tea**, made from compressed leaves and sometimes other parts of the plant to form a 'brick', making it easier to transport, is quite popular in Tibet, Mongolia and Russia where it is brewed with yak butter and salt. Brick tea was once used as a form of currency.

Apart from the above-mentioned classic teas, there are a large variety of teas perfumed with flowers or fruits, or oil of fruit such as Bergamot oil, from the bergamot orange. The well-known Earl Grey tea is flavoured with oil of bergamot, jasmine tea is flavoured with jasmine flower, and fruit-teas like apple or mango teas are teas with the respective dried fruits added.

The medicinal qualities of tea have been recognized since ancient times. Tea stimulates the nervous system, blood circulation and heartbeat. It also aids digestion. Its pharmacological effects are due mainly to its caffeine and tannin contents. Caffeine is well known for its diuretic and stimulant properties while tannins have astringent and germ-killing properties.

Tea and culture: Over the years, tea drinking has evolved into a very delicate art in many countries especially China and Japan. The true connoisseurs select the type and grade of tea with great care and discrimination. They put emphasis on the types of water, brewing conditions such as temperature and duration, brewing and serving utensils and last but not least, the surrounding ambience. The various traditions associated with tea drinking and serving in different countries, such as the Japanese tea ceremony and the British high tea never cease to fascinate those who are interested in the culture of tea.



A CUP OF TEA SOLVES EVERYTHING!

The following verses are loosely translated from a poem written by the Chinese poet Lu T'ung (7th century)

The first cup warms my lips and moistens my throat,

The second cup takes away my loneliness,

The third cup stirs my barren inside and inspires thousands of thoughts,

The fourth cup raises a slight sweat.... oh, all the wrongs of life have passed through my pores,

The fifth cup, I am purified,

The sixth cup, I am in the land of the immortals,

The seventh cup.... oh, I could take no more! I can only feel a sweet breeze rising gently through my sleeves,

Where is Seventh Heaven? Let me ride on this gentle sweet breeze and waft away...