

The English Way of Tea

There was a time when most European grandmothers regarded a crude or rude person as a person unfamiliar with the pleasures of tea. My grandmother was one of them and naturally, as her grandchild, I was often urged, during my teenage years, to drink tea instead of my favorite soft drink. Years have passed since I graduated from the gasified sweet drinks of my youth, but even more years have passed since the last time I was in London with my grandmother.

After a long absence, returning to London was inevitable a nostalgic, as well as an exciting experience. Between discovering new places and remembering old ones, I was busy not just in realizing how much London had changed, but how much my perspective of it had changed, too. What formerly had been taken for granted was now rich in meaning.

Power and Ambition

What is known in Europe as English tea and in England as simply tea in Asia is called Indian tea. Tea originated in Asia, and its history there is obviously longer than in Europe. Nevertheless, England remains second only to China regarding the influence that tea had in shaping a country's culture and history.

In a bid to end China's tea monopoly, the British decided to use tea seeds from China and produce their own tea in India. By 1836 tea culture had become established in India, and a few decades later in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The tea produced by the English differed from its Chinese cousin in the way it was processed and fermented, thus better suiting Western tastes.

As the British Empire extended its power and ambitions, so did everything that could be associated with the English way of life. In this way, in its early days, English tea became an extremely profitable economical asset to the Empire, and also an important cultural statement.

A Bit of Sanity

Since the end of the British Empire, much has changed, especially the way in which the English drink their tea. But teahouses still abound in London, and almost any London resident has their favorite place to drink tea. From the pretentious aristocratic teahouse, in which a touch of former days still can be felt, to the most modern ones, the choice remains nearly infinite. After trying a few myself, I soon found my favorite.

It is the Orangery, situated in Hyde Park close to Kensington Palace, Queen Anne's former winter greenhouse. Like a small oasis in the center of London's urban madness, the Orangery offers a bit of sanity away from the bustling city pressures. Besides being easily accessible from almost any part of the city, its setting is to the mind what tea is supposed to be to the soul.

From its wide, and when the weather permits, open windows facing the park, one can watch the trees in which birds whisper melodies older than the beverage itself. Gradually, as if by magic, one enters the peaceful world, which in every culture is associated with the act of drinking tea. It is a magic that turns tea from a simple daily beverage to quench one's thirst into a healing beverage to soothe the soul.

Indeed tea itself has a strong therapeutic power, but for tea to work as a healing beverage, it must be sipped during calm moments and in a perfect environment. This "perfect environment" is best chosen by simple common sense.

At the Orangery there is no dress code. The Orangery management clearly understands that tea is not a matter of outward appearance but truly an inward experience of making peace with one's soul that my grandmother regarded as the way to build one's inner character.

Or maybe she just liked tea.

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