

A Brief History of Tea

The beverage we call tea has long been consumed by humans. Did you know that tea is the second most drank beverage in the world? That's right, the only liquid that is drunk more than tea is the source of all beverages water. Before I briefly explain the brief history of tea, it is important to define what tea is. There are many types of herbal teas that are native to cultures and societies around the world, but the teas being referred to in this article are true teas. Green, yellow, white, oolong, dark and black teas are made from the "Camellia sinensis" plant. The variations of tea made from the "Camellia sinensis" plant is due to the levels of oxidation or fermentation (in the case of dark tea), in which they are processed. According to the journal article by "The Best Tea Bags Desk," herbal teas or rather herbal infusions are not considered real tea because they do not come from the "Camellia sinensis" plant.

It is believed that the tea plant likely originated in what is now northeastern India and spread throughout southeast Asia. The Chinese are the first known civilization to begin drinking tea, with historians dating that to around 2737 BCE during the Chinese Shang Dynasty. The story of the Chinese discovery of tea goes as follows: the Chinese emperor Shen Nung sat beneath a tree while his servant boiled hot water, then some leaves from a tree blew into the water. The Emperor decided to drink the water marking the discovery of drinking tea. It is unknown how true this tale is; humans could have possibly drunk tea even before this, but that being stated, tea from the "Camellia sinensis" plant was discovered in East Asia before anywhere else. An example of this can be found in tombs from China's Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) where containers of tea were discovered. Drinking tea spread to other civilizations in East Asia like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam during China's Tang Dynasty between 618 AD to 907 AD. The Japanese became so enthusiastic about tea, that their culture created the "tea ceremony," which

has been refined over the centuries since tea's introduction into Japan. The tea ceremony usually involves matcha which is made from a powdered version of green tea.

The British are known for drinking tea, but this is really only within the last 400 years. Tea was first introduced to Europe through the Silk Road, but it did not become more readily available until the Portuguese and Dutch began travelling to East Asia in the 16th century during the age of exploration. The Dutch became the first Europeans to import tea for commercial purposes. Primarily through the Dutch East India Company which began importing tea from Java. Tea began to gain popularity in Europe in the mid 17th century in the Netherlands and in Great Britain. The marriage between King Charles II and the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza sprung the popularity of tea among the upper class in England. Tea became popular in coffee houses, which were not only places to enjoy drinks, but also centers for business making the drink popular among the middle class as well, but the drink was expensive so it was not readily available for working class people. The first tax on the tea leaf was introduced in 1689, but it was such a ridiculous tax that it had to be reduced three years later in 1692.

In the 18th century the tea trade expanded in England even further with the British East India Company exporting silver to China in order to pay for tea, silk and porcelain, leading to a trade imbalance. The British East India Company eventually switched to selling opium grown in India to slow down the spending of silver. However, this spurred the Opium Wars in 1839-1842 and 1856-1860. The British East India Company eventually set up tea plantations in India in order to stop the trade imbalance with China.

While it is not the topic of the paper, I should mention that in American history, the Tea Act of 1773 leading to the Boston Tea Party, shows the popularity of tea in the British colonies.

The colonists, unhappy with “taxation without representation,” dumped the British East India Company's 342 chests full of tea, into the Boston Harbor.

In conclusion, tea made from the “*Camellia sinensis*” plant, is a beverage enjoyed by many throughout the modern day and in the past. Its consumption started in China and would then spread to the rest of East Asia. Eventually it was introduced to Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries, then became widely adopted in the 18th and 19th centuries to now being the second most drunk beverage in the world.

Sources

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