

Moonlight-picking and other rituals give Indian teas a tag of exclusivity



Tea-pickers and tea estate owners in the estates that dot the hill slopes of Darjeeling believe that on certain full moon nights, the sun, moon, earth and other cosmic forces are aligned in a particular order, making everything just perfect for tea picking.

The premium picks

Tea leaves are thus picked in the moonlight, only four or five times a year based on a celestial calendar. This 'Champagne of Teas', harvested in Makaibari, one of the oldest tea estates in Darjeeling, is described as a relaxing, anti-ageing liquor, ideally sipped at bedtime. Silver Tips Imperial tea leaves are picked and packaged before the first light of dawn, to keep the integrity of the aroma. The pre-picking protocol for this exclusive tea begins with a ceremony held at dusk, with drums and prayer chants calling on the Gods to be present during the tea-picking ritual.

This tea has been served at Buckingham Palace, at World Cup events and is a favourite with the rich and famous, around the world.

The tea is exclusive and priced at a premium. In a BBC interview, the owner of the estate says that there have been years when the tea has sold at a record price of US\$1850 for a kilogram to buyers in Japan, USA and UK.

Manohari Gold, another celebri-tea from India is also rare and expensive. Grown in Manohari Tea Estate in Assam's Dibrugarh district, Manohari Gold is an orthodox variety of plant that yields golden-tipped leaves. Unlike other tea leaves from Assam that are dark or almost black, this variety produces leaves that are a shade of burnished gold. The special variety of tea leaves are picked pre-dawn (between 4am and 6am) to prevent the sun from altering its distinct aroma and flavour. They are then hand-rolled, and since the process requires time and skill, the yield does not exceed 50 grams a day. The last recorded produce for the season was just 2 kilograms.

Manohari Gold fetched a price of US\$562 in the domestic market. Since it is produced in smaller volumes, the tea fetches a premium.

Tea from Donyi Polo Tea Estate, located in a remote village in Arunachal Pradesh, has also been making a mark in auction records with its Golden Needle and Purple teas. The estate produces six varieties of speciality teas. The estate made news when its Golden Needles tea sold for as much as US\$567.6 for a kilogram, making it the most expensive tea sold at any auction within India, until now. The tea enjoys special treatment — only its buds are plucked and hand-rolled to give them their needle-like shape. Purple tea from the same Donyi Polo Tea Estate was auctioned at US\$353 for a kilogram. Each of these extremely rare tea variants - Oolong, Yellow, White, Silver Needles, Golden Needles and Purple are specialty teas, cultivated with care. They reach their full potential only when everything, including the weather conditions, align.

Recent developments in the tea sector have been encouraging for tea-plantations in the Northeast. Their numbers are growing, especially in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Assam which have traditionally featured on the tea-growing map. Arunachal Pradesh's climate and its numerous Himalayan-fed rivers make it an ideal destination for growing exotic, organic varieties of teas.

Ek chaai ho jaaye!

A lot happens in India over a cup of tea. Tea legends abound here. The Sanjeevani booti which is believed to have revived a sinking Lakshmana (ref Ramayana) is said to have been the earliest form of chai in India. In the 12th century, the leaves of tea shrubs were used as a herb by members of the Singhpoo tribe in Assam.

Indian tea production grew during the colonization of India by the British who employed domestic labour to work in the tea estates. In fact, it was a gentleman named William Mckercher who invented the cut, tear, curl (CTC) method of processing tea that resulted in the brew becoming more popular and more affordable for mass consumption. India's domestic consumption of tea is said to be around 837,000 tonnes per year.

Today, India's CTC blends are among the best in the world. The tea industry in the country is currently recording peak performance. In FY 2018 the Indian tea industry recorded the highest

production till date. The total tea production stood at 1325.05 million kgs, a growth of 74.56 million kgs (6%) year-on-year. In the international market, there is high demand for Indian tea given the decline in tea exports from Kenya, which is the largest exporter of CTC tea globally.