



TEA CULTURE *in the* NORTHEAST

India is the world's largest tea-drinking nation and the second largest producer of tea, after China. The verdant tea gardens of the Northeast region are the primary sources when it comes to a nation obsessed with chai. We put the kettle on and sip on the cup that is life around the colonial tea bungalow. *By MONALISA BORKAKOTY*

SHUTTERSTOCK

Tea workers carry bamboo baskets to collect tea leaves at a tea estate in Assam.

T

he chronology of tea's evolution is intertwined with India's multifaceted history. When the British first discovered tea culture of Assam's indigenous community, Singpho, they were quick to manifest the idea of monetising the shrub. And ever since then, there has been no looking back.

Though history books speak about how the Chinese introduced tea to India, it is only partially correct. The British, who were effectively operational in the northeast region of India, always shared an amicable relationship with the locals and got acquainted with their culture and ways of life. Records suggest a British officer was appointed in 1838 as the Superintendent of Tea Gardens to improve the conditions of tea production in Assam. The aim was to turn the northeastern state into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons. It meant business. And huge profits were to be made in the process. It wasn't an easy ride though. Assam was highly depopulated due to the Burmese infiltration in those days. The superintendent had to arrange labourers from adjoining provinces of British India, besides looking into the extensive logistics involving transportation from the remote Upper Assam to the state capital of Guwahati and further to neighbouring Calcutta (erstwhile Indian capital), and finally to London. It could only be managed

through waterways and inadvertently there was only one carrier.

The Chinese monopoly in the global tea industry was over by 1833, and the first 'tea committee' was set up the very next year. Conducive research showed that Assam was an ideal place for tea plantation, and to prove a point the British officials exported indigenous tea bushes to the government. Charles Alexander Bruce is considered the father of the Indian tea industry, and his contribution in earning the shrub international recognition is commendable. After multiple interactions with the Singphoes and the Khamties—both ethnic communities from Northern Burma—Bruce arrived at the conclusion that they were well acquainted with the tea bushes and also knew how to consume the brew. As Bruce carried out further groundwork, he met Maniram Dewan, who was among the first tea garden owners in Assam, and later got to meet the chief of Singpho tribe, Beesa Gam. With rigorous work, Dewan emerged as one of the pioneers in the tea industry, and cleared the route for the Britons to figure out their way into and around the tea estate life.

As the tea estates flourished, so did the idea of the high-heeled estate life. Wild Mahseer (*wildmahseer.com*) is among the few heritage tea bungalows, which allows travellers to experience this evocative lifestyle through its cosy reading spaces, elaborate tea rooms, plush verandahs, and manicured gardens. The Vernerpur Tea Estate (*est. in 1876; Cachar Native Joint Stock, Vernerpur, Hailakandi, 788167*) was one of the first tea estates to be established in the region, and continues to produce 8,00,000 kg of tea every year. This produce is auctioned at the iconic Russell Exchange (*12 C, Russel St, Park Street*) in Kolkata and the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre (*assamteaxchange.com*). The period after independence saw the establishment of several tea gardens like Ghograjan (*ghograjan.com*), Khetojaan (*Dhunseri Tea & Industries Limited, Bahadur Tea Estate, PO Tinsukia*), Alakananda (*Post box 76, Khetopathar Gaon, Assam*), and McLeod Russel (*mcleodrussel.com*). Celebrated traditions, such as high tea,

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POWER PACKED TEA

Besides the more famous black tea, Assam also grows blue tea produced from the blue pea flower plant called *Clitoria Ternatea* or the Asian Pigeonwings. Highly medicinal in value, the shrub grows in abundance in the region and contains calcium, magnesium, potassium, zinc, iron, manganese, and sodium. It has anti-oxidant and anti-ageing properties as well.



One of the bungalows at Wild Mahseer.

KNOW YOUR TEA

India is known for mainly four varieties of tea, namely green tea, black tea, oolong tea, and white tea—all made from the *Camellia Sinensis* plant. The end products depend on how the tea leaves are processed. For instance, white tea undergoes the least processing, while black tea goes through an oxidation process to attain its distinct flavour. Contrary to popular belief, white tea contains more anti-oxidants than green tea. Oolong tea, meanwhile, is loved by people who prefer a low caffeine variant.



COURTESY OF WILD MAHSEER; OPPOSITE: SHUTTERSTOCK



TRADITIONALLY, **BLACK TEA** SHOULD BE SAVOURED MINUS ANY SUGAR OR HONEY. SWEETENED ACCOMPANIMENT LIKE A **MACAROON** OR **BLUEBERRY SCONES** MAKE FOR GREAT PAIRINGS.



From top: A serving of smoked bamboo tea along with the equipment used to procure the beverage; artists from Singpho tribe who are considered to be one of the earliest consumers of tea.

club meets, Sunday brunches, and community work, set into motion by the British continue to be a part of life here.

While Assam carries the crown of the Indian tea industry, its neighbouring states too have their signature ways of consuming the wild herb. In Arunachal Pradesh, the indigenous tribes tightly pack the tea leaves in bamboo shafts and smoke it for four to 10 years. The process was originally adapted by the tribesmen so as to be able to stock it for longer periods of time. The resulting black tea is distinctly strong and arouses the taste buds. Traditionally, it should be savoured minus any sugar or honey; however, sweetened accompaniment like a macaroon, pineapple cake, or blueberry scones go just right with the malty flavours of the tea.

On the other hand, black tea from Meghalaya has a composed texture, minus any bitter undertones. The traditional brew is fit for the perfectly steeped full-bodied black tea or the conventional variety consumed with sugar and milk. Meanwhile, Oolong tea, also from Meghalaya, bears unusual citrus and spicy notes making it a preferred option for breakfast. This tea grows at an average elevation of over 6,000 ft, and exudes a smoky aroma when brewed and is olive green-yellow in colour.

The region's tea culture has inspired young locals to spread the word through inquisitive initiatives. Elizabeth Yambem, in late 20s, gave up an illustrious career as a financial analyst in London to open Dweller Teas (dwellerteas.com) in Imphal, Manipur,

SHUTTERSTOCK; (TOP) COURTESY OF AVETEA



where the blends are created from local plants native to her hometown. The Nong-mang-kha Ginger Green Tea with anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties is among Dweller Tea's bestsellers, and has been in use for centuries to cure common cold. Likewise, the Hei-mang Red Tea is among the authentic creations passed down by Yambem's grandmother. The tea is soaked overnight and served the next day; the cold brew has a citrusy tone and acts as a great digestive.

The Bengaluru-based AveTea (avetea.com) is another such initiative, which primarily works with small tea growers from Assam. The idea is to put tea cultivators who practice time-honoured methods to grow tea the old-fashioned way at the forefront of the revolution. Some of their creations include Smoked Exotica, which is smoked for four-plus years and Pan-Fried tea, which is roasted and hand rolled to perfection.

COURTESY OF WILD MAHSEER (2)



From top: The Reading Room at Wild Mahseer; foreign guests enjoying an activity at Wild Mahseer.

GETTING THERE

Guwahati (Assam), Imphal (Manipur), and Shillong (Meghalaya) are the main airports serving the remote Northeast region. Connecting flights operate from metro cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata.

STAY

Wild Mahseer is a heritage property, which provides accommodation in the form of bungalows and homestays. It offers tea experiences and other activities. Starts from ₹6,600/US\$95; wildmahseer.com

WHEN

November to May are the best months to explore the Northeast.

IDEAL FOR

Couples and tea enthusiasts who like first-hand experiences.

MUST-SEE

Mokalbari Tea Estate (mokalbaritea.in) in Upper Assam specialises in tippy golden tea, and is a preferred choice for tea walks. The Beesakopie Tea Estate (mcleodrussel.com) in Tinsukia lies closer to the Burmese border, and is the third largest in the country.