

## Book Reviews

**G. P. Baroowah**, *Tea: Legend, Life and Livelihood of India*. Assam, India: Red River/LBS Publications, 2006. 148 pages.

**Lydia Gautier**, *Tea: Aromas and Flavors around the World*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2006. 192 pages.

**Mary Lou Heiss & Robert J. Heiss**, *The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2007. xiv + 418 pages.

**Beatrice Hohenegger**, *Liquid Jade: The Story of Tea from East to West*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006. xiv + 320 pages.

**Laura C. Martin**, *Tea: The Drink That Changed the World*. Tokyo: Tuttle, 2007. viii + 248 pages.

### From Asia to the World

Anyone who has recently been paying attention to the media must know about the purported health benefits of drinking tea. Research has shown that tea offers powerful antioxidant protection, stimulates the metabolism, protects against heart disease and cancer, and lowers cholesterol and blood sugar levels.<sup>1</sup> Around the world, nearly 3.5 billion cups of tea are consumed per day, with Turks and the Irish drinking the most, per capita. Despite the health claims, tea is only the sixth-most consumed beverage in the United States (after water, soft drinks, coffee, beer, and milk), with 80 to 85 percent being consumed as iced tea. All tea—herbal infusions and tisanes aside—is brewed from processed leaves of *Camellia sinensis* varietals, plants native to the hilly regions of northeastern India, southern China (Sichuan and Yunnan provinces), and northern Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Today, though, tea is available and consumed in virtually every country and is cultivated in some fifty tropical and semi-tropical countries on six continents. How did this Asian plant become so popular? And what is so compelling about its story that warranted the publication of these five books within just two years?

All five works reviewed here address the question of the popularity of tea; and the authors of all five offer their own perspectives and frameworks for understanding this plant and its historical, cultural, social, political,

economic, and environmental impacts on the world. If you have time to read them all, you will be saturated with colorful descriptions, memorable stories and biographies, scientific details, fascinating trivia, and a desire to rush to a tea purveyor so you can seek out new varieties of tea to try for yourself.

### **An Indian Perspective on Tea**

Although indigenous to northeastern India, tea was not profitably cultivated there until the middle of the nineteenth century, when most of India was under control of the British East India Company. Today, India and China are the world's largest producers of tea. In India, tea estates are located in the northeast (Assam and West Bengal) and south (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka). With some 1.25 million full-time workers, the tea industry is second only to the Indian railways in the number of employees.

In *Tea: Legend, Life and Livelihood of India*, G. P. Baroowah, a poet, columnist, and economist with many years of management service in the Indian tea industry, offers a charmingly disorganized yet lovely coffee table-style book on the impact of tea in India and on the world. This oversize work is filled with marvelous full-color two-page spreads that detail the production and manufacturing of tea, its Indian environment, and the lives of tea plantation workers. Baroowah bookends his work with a fictitious story of a British manager of a tea plantation but then gets serious with sections on the history of tea, the classifications and processing of tea, the development of the tea industry and tea culture in India, health benefits of tea, and suggestions for the future of the Indian tea industry. Each chapter opens with a poem or salient quotation about tea from the likes of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941),<sup>2</sup> and Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936).

The history Baroowah presents is a bit skimpy, but the material about life on Indian tea plantations makes this work stand out. Baroowah offers a helpful discussion of the development of the agro-industrial tea workforce in the mid-nineteenth century, when laborers were imported into various regions (especially Assam) from other parts of the country to clear jungle and work on the newly established tea plantations. Although he claims that members of the so-called tea tribes were “slowly integrated into the larger milieu of Assam” (p. 105), the rise of militancy there—and also in Sri Lanka—toward the end of the twentieth century was undoubtedly due to lingering ethnic frictions. Also interesting are his descriptions of welfare projects undertaken by the Indian tea industry, dating from the establishment of the Prince of Wales Technical School in Assam by a (British) co-founder of a major tea group in 1865. And Baroowah describes the role of tea (and tea companies) in protecting the environment (e.g., helping to fight

erosion) and assisting in the repopulation of endangered species (e.g., the pigmy hog, white-winged wood duck, and freshwater dolphins).

Although his book was intentionally written for the “lay reader” (p. 9), Baroowah occasionally forgets that some readers of English may be unfamiliar with the Indian patois: He uses such terms as *dhaba*, *sahib*, *lakh*, *bigha*, and *paise* without definition.<sup>3</sup> A text similar in scope and design, cited by Baroowah, is D. K. Taknet’s *The Heritage of Indian Tea: The Past, the Present, and the Road Ahead* (Jaipur, India: Indian Institute of Marwari Entrepreneurship, 2002). In short, Taknet’s work offers greater detail on almost all the topics covered by Baroowah.

### The Appreciation of Tea

Like Baroowah’s book, Lydia Gautier’s *Tea: Aromas and Flavors around the World* is a lavishly illustrated coffee-table specimen. In producing this beautifully designed book on the experience and appreciation of tea, Gautier, an agricultural engineer who specializes in tropical agronomy, was aware that significant contexts require illumination, including history, science, aesthetics, and the relation of tea to culture. Major chapters cover the history of tea, agronomy and tea processing, tea tasting, and compatibilities of tea with other worlds of taste. Gautier explores tea “as a gastronomic product in its own right” (p. 5) and thus includes five (gourmet) recipes. Just try to imagine fresh foie gras poached in a crushed coffee-bean crust with truffles and Yunnan red tea (p. 162)!

What Gautier does not leave to the imagination is the relation between tea and the local conditions of its growth: borrowing from wine nomenclature, such attributes as soil, climate, and exposure contribute to the *terroir*, or “sense of place,” of tea. Processing also affects the finished product, and Gautier clearly explains how teas of the six classic tea colors of white, green, yellow, red, blue-green, and black—codified in China during the Ming 明 dynasty (1368–1644)—are processed. Theoretically, any tea leaf can be processed into any “color” of tea, although certain varieties grown in certain locales better suit certain processing methods. Gautier also does a remarkable job describing—both visually and textually—the Japanese tea ceremony and the Chinese *gong fu cha* 工夫茶 tea-appreciating technique. Her scientific background shines when she presents a fascinating table outlining the chemical composition of a fresh tea leaf: polyphenols, alkaloids (including caffeine), protids, organic acids, glucids, lipids, chlorophylls, mineral salts, and volatile substances (p. 86). She explores the material culture of tea, a “product imbued with a strong cultural dimension” (p. 110). Her notes and visuals on tasting and tea grading are superb. (After all, she was instrumental in the creation of the École du Thé, a training center for the tasting and culture of tea, at Le Palais des Thés in Paris.)<sup>4</sup> And once more

borrowing from oenology, she describes—again both visually and textually—thirty-two *grand cru* (“great growth”) teas. Of the five books reviewed here, Gautier’s *Tea* is the only one to offer comments on tea as an ingredient in perfume and cosmetics.

### **An Encyclopedia of Tea**

In *The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide*, veteran tea traders Mary Lou Heiss and Robert Heiss present a veritable encyclopedia of tea. Their hefty tome, a 2008 International Association of Culinary Professionals Cookbook Awards finalist in the single-subject category, also explores ways in which differences in *terroir* and production result in the diversity of color, flavor, and quality of brewed tea. They investigate the history of tea, the life of a tea bush, manufacturing processes, brewing methods, tea customs, health benefits, ethics in the tea trade, and cooking with tea. Color photographs are aplenty; and one strength of the Heisses’ volume is the numerous photographs showing stages of various tea-processing techniques. Most of these photographs were taken by the authors themselves during their many tea expeditions: “Our search for fine tea draws us back time and time again to Asia,” they write in the preface (p. ix).

Their 142-page chapter entitled “Journeying along the Tea Trail” could almost be a book in and of itself: the Heisses offer sections on China, Japan, Korea, India, Russia and Georgia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal, Africa, Vietnam, Thailand, and other tea-growing countries—including the United States, where tea is grown in Hawai’i (Kona) and on a plantation on Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina. Historical and manufacturing information that appears elsewhere in the book is often repeated in this chapter. For example, yellow tea has a brief entry in the chapter on manufacturing (pp. 70–71) as well as in this chapter (pp. 162–63). The repetition also invites contradictions: “In all, 108,000 acres of tea gardens are under cultivation in Vietnam” (p. 244), but “Today the total amount of land in Vietnam under tea cultivation is 185,000 acres” (p. 248). Many such repetitions or inconsistencies can be found throughout the book, especially when the numerous sidebars are included. A statement in a sidebar (p. 141) about tasting a fifty-year-old *pu-erh* 普洱 tea in Dali, Yunnan, is repeated almost word for word on page 308.

Given its length (over 400 pages), the Heisses’ volume should offer the last word on tea; but certain explanations are lacking. For example, the Heisses mention the mixing of salt into tea in western China, Tibet, and Mongolia (pp. 10–11, 343, 345), a tradition that dates from the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907); but they do not explain why salt was used. (Gautier does: Salt counteracts the bitterness and highlights the natural sweetness of tea.) Likewise, the Heisses use but do not explain the term “fannings” (broken

leaves that are “fanned” away after processing and often end up in teabags) or the nomenclature of “orange pekoe,” likely named for the Dutch royal house (Oranje-Nassau) and a Westernization of the Chinese *pak ho* 白毫 (Cantonese pronunciation of “white hair”), which refers to the hairy down on young tea leaves.

Repetition, inconsistencies, inverted images (see, e.g., pp. 100 and 117), inexplicable diacritic usage, and errors in Japanese terms aside (for example, the authors thrice write of “Rinsai”—instead of *Rinzai*—Buddhism; and they translate *shincha* 新茶 as “first pick” and *ichiban cha* 一番茶 as “new tea” on p. 45: these translations should be reversed), the Heisses offer a wealth of cultural, historical, and scientific information about tea and tea appreciation. Most compellingly, perhaps, is that their passion for tea is evident on almost every page.

### Stories of Tea

Beatrice Hohenegger’s intelligent offering, *Liquid Jade: The Story of Tea from East to West*, is, from one perspective, a book of trivia (e.g., “Queen Elizabeth I had rotten teeth,” p. 98). But she has woven together bits and pieces from numerous historical documents to tell a compelling story. Hohenegger, a freelance author, will guest curate a traveling museum exhibition on the history and culture of tea in 2009: *Liquid Jade* will make a useful companion piece to the exhibit. Her book is soundly structured and includes numerous (nicely captioned) monochrome images, but the typeface for the page numbers is cryptic to the point of rendering the numbers useless. Her use of macrons for Japanese names and terms is idiosyncratic; and her explanation of the Chinese character for tea, *cha* 茶 (p. 180), which Gauthier and the Heisses describe accurately, is somewhat misleading.

Hohenegger’s book is organized into four parts: a section focusing on tea in Asia; a section focusing on tea in the West; a section of tea-related trivia (entitled “Curiosities, Obscurities, Misnomers, and Facts”); and a section on contemporary issues, including human rights and fair-trade tea, wherein she traces the roots of the modern organic movement to China and India. Each of her forty-three short, essay-like chapters opens with a fascinating epigraph from literature or a historical work relevant to tea. “Because *Liquid Jade* is mostly a historical book” (p. 278), Hohenegger uses Wade-Giles transliteration throughout; but she includes a useful appendix listing names and terms in both Wade-Giles and Pinyin. She also includes a helpful appendix of Chinese dynasties and Japanese chronological periods, plus a substantial bibliography and a thorough index. She handles citations in an elegantly unobtrusive manner.

In the sections on East and West, Hohenegger demonstrates her skill at portraying the lives of various individuals, including Lu Yu 陆羽 (733–804),

the Sage of Tea; Tang poet Lu Tong 盧同 (790–835); Song emperor Hui-zong 徽宗 (1082–1135); naval admiral Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433);<sup>5</sup> and Qing scholar and diplomat Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850). Indeed, her portrayals are mere snapshots of these fascinating individuals; but her presentations are certainly enough to pique interest to learn more. As for India, Hohenegger provides the political and economic background necessary to understand, at least on a basic level, the British colonial involvement there with respect to tea. Skilled at contextualizing themes and events, reductivistically at times, Hohenegger drapes the sweeping narrative of history around the hot commodities and events of the times. For example, she labels tea as the “trigger” of the slave trade (p. 101)—in that Britain’s need for sugar (from the Caribbean) was fueled by its obsession for tea (from India). She therefore ultimately portrays tea as the “unwitting vector of boundless human misery on an intercontinental scale” (p. 102). And, at times, she is more tongue in cheek in her conclusions: “As a whole, tea suggests an undeniable sense of peaceable moderation while coffee evokes vivid images of road rage. After all, there is no Japanese coffee ceremony” (p. 229).

### **The Impact of Tea**

Like Hohenegger, Laura Martin, in *Tea: The Drink That Changed the World*, offers a reductivistic social history (à la recent works by Alan and Iris Macfarlane, Roy Moxham, and Tom Standage).<sup>6</sup> The subtitle makes clear her main point. “Much of tea’s history illustrates the never ending human story of class division—of greed, power, and wealth on one side and of hunger and poverty on the other,” she suggests (p. 4). Martin is somewhat casual with her references, but readers familiar with some of the more popular works on tea will recognize material from the Macfarlanes and William Ukers’ 1935 classic, *All About Tea*.<sup>7</sup> She solves the potential problem of diacritic inconsistencies by using no macrons at all for Asian names or terms given in her text. Also, not all of her numerous illustrations—especially reproductions of tea advertisements—are captioned; but several of the illustrations are apparently by the author herself.

Martin efficiently takes care of the particulars in a brief opening chapter on the agronomy, production, processing, classifying, and grading of tea. Thereafter, her work is structurally similar to Hohenegger’s, in that she progresses from East to West, with chapters on tea in China and Korea; tea in Japan (including a stand-alone chapter on the Japanese tea ceremony); British involvement in India, China, and Ceylon; and tea in the United States. In a brilliant organizational move, she relegates certain information to a bevy of appendices: information on tea-growing countries, tea professionals’ terms for describing tea, a list of choice teas, brewing instructions,

cooking with tea, tea and health, and herbal “teas” (which are not teas at all and are thus perhaps the only irrelevant inclusion).

As a horticulturalist and botanical illustrator, Martin’s interests shine forth in this book. She is the only one to explain the nomenclature of tea’s botanical name: “The name *Camellia* came from a Moravian Jesuit named Georg Joseph Kamel (1661–1706), who studied Asian plants. The species name, *sinensis*, means ‘from China’” (p. 145). She explains that hillside planting provides better drainage, which is necessary for tea plants (p. 32). And she even offers a sidebar on growing your own tea: “*Camellia sinensis* prefers the same growing conditions that azaleas and rhododendrons do” (p. 11).

Of all the works portrayed here, Martin’s offers the most on the contents of Lu Yu’s *Classic of Tea* (*Chajing* 茶经). She also offers some of the most detailed information on how pottery and ceramics were historically made in China and Japan—and how the evolution of tea artifacts paralleled changes in favored processing techniques throughout the Ming dynasty, from brick tea to powdered tea to loose tea. She delivers trivia, as well; for example, tea was introduced in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1647 by the Dutch *ten years* before it was introduced to London (p. 182)! But her presentation is not perfect: she conflates oxidation with fermentation (pp. 15, 19, 101) and offers an etymology of the Japanese term *wabi*, of the *wabi-sabi* 侘寂 aesthetic relevant to the Japanese tea ceremony, that is uncommonly supported in Japan.

### Tea for Today & Tomorrow

This short review does not do justice to the vast amount of information about tea provided in these five works. Most interesting, perhaps, is how approaching tea as an object of study requires attention to matters encompassing a wide range of disciplines and fields: agronomy, botany, chemistry, nutrition, medicine, engineering, art, architecture, aesthetics, literature, material culture, history, religion, political science, economics, marketing, and more. Certain authors, befitting their backgrounds, necessarily favor certain topics and approaches. But the five works reviewed here have numerous commonalities. All mention the Chinese legend of Shen Nong 神農 (and the purported discovery of tea as a beverage in 2732 B.C.E.); Lu Yu and his *Classic of Tea*; Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu* 茶の湯); Catherine of Braganza (1638–1705, wife of Charles II and purported popularizer of tea in Britain); the Boston Tea Party (December 16, 1773); and health claims of tea. Most mention the legend of Bodhidharma (ca. early fifth century C.E.), with respect to the “discovery” of tea; the role of Sen Rikyū 千利休 (1522–91) in the development of Japanese tea ceremony; Robert Bruce and Charles Bruce, with respect to the earliest cultivation of tea in Assam in the first half of the nineteenth century; the mid–nineteenth century Opium

Wars; Robert Fortune (1812–80), with respect to learning tea secrets from the Chinese; Thomas Lipton (1848–1941), with respect to the cultivation of tea in Sri Lanka and the marketing of tea in the West; and the role of clipper ships and “transatlantic regattas” prior to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the rise of the steamship.

Across the board, however, all five books fail to deliver useful maps. The two largely political maps provided by the Heisses (pp. 5, 30)—the only maps in any of these works—do not point out any of the particular regions they and the other authors describe, including Anhui, Assam, Darjeeling, Fujian, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Readers must therefore consult external maps in order to understand better the very geography of tea.<sup>8</sup>

If I had to limit my library to but one of these five books on tea, I would choose Gautier’s beautiful volume, even though the glossy pages of Gautier (along with those of Baroowah and Heiss and Heiss) are difficult to read at length, unless the lighting is just right. Gautier’s work, for me, provides a perfect balance of well-organized, information-dense text and artistic, evocative images. Steep yourself in any or all of these recent books on tea, and you will be richly rewarded.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Johnny Bowden, *The 150 Healthiest Foods on Earth* (Gloucester, MA: Fair Winds Press, 2007), 264–68.

<sup>2</sup>Also known as Gurudev, the Bengali poet Tagore was Asia’s first Nobel laureate, winning the 1913 Nobel Prize in literature.

<sup>3</sup>Here are my definitions: *dhaba*: diner-like roadside restaurant serving local fare in India and Pakistan; *sahib*: “sir,” “master,” or “lord”; *lakh*: one hundred thousand; *bigha*: an area of land, generally less than an acre; *paise*: one-hundredth of a Bangladeshi taka or an Indian, Nepalese, or Pakistani rupee.

<sup>4</sup>Their informative English-language Web site is here: <http://www.palaisdesthes.com/en/>.

<sup>5</sup>For an account of Zheng He’s naval adventures and their ramifications, see James R. Holmes, “‘Soft Power’ at Sea: Zheng He and China’s Maritime Diplomacy,” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 28 (2006): 95–106.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Macfarlane and Iris Macfarlane, *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* (London: Ebury, 2003); Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003); Tom Standage, *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>William H. Ukers, *All About Tea*, 2 vols. (New York: Tea and Coffee Trade Journal, 1935). All three works with bibliographies—Gautier, Heiss and Heiss, and Hohenegger—cite this reference; Martin cites Ukers as a source for at least two images.

<sup>8</sup>“With a map,” according to Hugh Johnson, “distinctions and relationships become clear. Things fall into place.” Good maps are therefore “more than aids to navigation.” *The World Atlas of Wine: A Complete Guide to the Wines & Spirits of the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 8.