Tea

The ritual surrounding tea is very old, and has undergone many changes over the centuries. Nowadays, tea-making in Britain is radically different from what it used to be. Ninety percent of the tea we drink is now sold in **individual** teabags, and the average infusion time is estimated to be less than 50 seconds - a sharp contrast to the traditions of 50 years ago, when loose-leaf tea was sold by **weight** and required a five-minute infusion in a teapot. For years visitors from **abroad** have associated the English with tea-drinking, but modern tourists are often disappointed to find that the tradition has changed **considerably**. Bone china **teapots** are rarely used nowadays in Britain to make tea, but are still found on sale for tourists to buy at exorbitant prices. Tea bags are commonly used instead of loose-leaf tea, and the tea is more often than not made directly in mugs, rather than in a pot. Tea is drunk all day long, even in offices, and not just in the afternoon.

In earlier centuries, British tea came from China. In the 1850s, tea-planting began in northern India, followed by Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), where some of the major British companies, **such** as Lipton, first started exporting the dry, rolled leaves to Britain from the large tea-growing estates. Once in Britain, the tea leaves were used for making delicate infusions. They were spooned into teapots, boiling water was **added** and the infusion was left to brew for a few minutes. This became the **essence** of the English afternoon tea - i.e. the mid-afternoon snack with which tea was drunk.

**By** the twentieth century, however, most other European countries had adopted the habit of drinking coffee. In the UK, the proportion of coffee **sold** in comparison to tea was only 1%. Coffee producers decided to try attracting the British public by presenting coffee as a soluble powder, described as instant. Tea producers responded by putting the leaves through a crushing **machine**, the effect of which was to produce tea that was almost the same shape and size as sugar. It was then described **as** quick-brew tea.

For some **decades**, carefully measured quantities of quick-brew tea (traditionally, one teaspoonful for each person plus an extra one for the pot) continued to be brewed in teapots, but the crushed leaves offered the practical **advantage** that they could be packed in small quantities into individual bags which were easier to use and could be thrown away in the rubbish bin and **therefore** did not risk blocking sinks as loose-leaf tea often did! So today 90% of the UK population uses teabags.