

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.

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