

Darjeeling: Tea by Any Other Name Would Not Taste as Sweet

Story and photography by Bruce Richardson

One of the questions most asked of me is “What is your favorite tea?” I wish I had an easy, pat answer for the reporters and tea novices who ask me that question. You would have to be a fairly new student of tea to ask that question. Anyone who has been traveling “the way of tea” for some time finally realizes that there can never be a tea that draws your complete attention day after day. Teas are in a constant state of evolution. Just when you think you have it figured out, you discover that China is making sencha and white teas are being produced in India. Those are just a few of the many serendipitous events that make the world of tea so exciting.

I have the opportunity to taste hundreds of teas each year. Often, while staying overnight in tea gardens, my breakfast tea is a tea that was plucked the day before from bushes outside my bungalow door. I have developed a great affinity and respect for teas of all nationalities and colors. Having said that, I now admit something my friends already suspect: I have a deep affection for and profound loyalty to the teas of Darjeeling.

Even before the pervasive mists of those magical mountains entered my nostrils and infected my soul, I was a devout believer in the copper red cup and the muscatel aroma of Darjeeling tea. I have imported these teas for nearly five years. I finally made the arduous trip to the “top of the world” to visit six gardens in 2004. Norwood Pratt, author of *The New Tea Lover’s Treasury*, and Pearl Dexter, editor of *Tea Magazine*, and others told me it would change my life. They were right. The dramatic Himalayan vistas, framed by row after row of tea bushes and accented by lush green forests, are intoxicating.



In Darjeeling, what is called a garden is actually a large plantation that may cover 1,000 or more acres, and cover 1,000 feet in altitude. Puttabong Tea Estate, just outside the town of Darjiling, stretches for 10 miles and goes from an elevation of 1,500 feet to 6,300 feet! These plantations, established by the British in 1852, are home to hundreds of workers and their families. Most are self-contained communities with their own schools, hospitals and temples.

Characteristics of the Darjeeling tea bushes

Tea bushes cultivated in Darjeeling mostly belong to the China *jat* (*jat* means variety) and China hybrid and, to a lesser extent, the Assam hybrid. The China *jat* is more prevalent at higher altitudes because of its ability to survive the cold mountain climate. It is a hardy,

multi-stemmed, slow-growing evergreen shrub which, if allowed, can grow up to seven feet in height. It takes three to six years to mature.

Under cultivation it is pruned for easy picking and trained as a low spreading bush to ensure a maximum crop of young shoots. It's not unusual to find 60 to 100-year-old *Camellia* bushes growing in many gardens. Following decades of upper stem pruning, the trunks of these mature bushes can be a foot in circumference. The bushes are pruned regularly in order to encourage new leaf growth and to minimize mature stems. Severe collar pruning - where the trunk is cut to the ground - is sometimes employed to force new vibrant shoots from the older roots.

Plucking season begins with the *first flush* of new growth in March and April. Following a short period of dormancy, the plants put forth a *second flush* that is picked from May into June. The summer months bring daily heavy rains from July until September, yielding a *monsoon flush*. (I was surprised to find that some of the gardens had switched to green tea production during the high yield monsoon season to secure large international contracts.) The *autumnal flush* is picked in October and November. The cold winter months of December to February are a period of dormancy.

Two and one-half acres yield an average of only 1,200 pounds of dry tea (less than a third of the yield of gardens in Assam or Nilgiri). Each Darjeeling tea bush yields only 3-4 ounces of processed tea in a year. Each pound of fine tea consists of more than 9,000 individually hand plucked shoots!



Top grade first and second flush darjeelings will bring some of the highest prices found at the Calcutta tea auctions. Many will not make it to auction because international buyers will pay top dollar, euro or yen for the best offerings.

Looking over the lush remote valleys and tea-carpeted mountain slopes, these serene vistas disguise the fact that the tea gardens of Darjeeling are often in a struggle to survive. Aging gardens and counterfeit "Darjeeling" teas are the two main problems facing this 150-year-old industry.

Reviving century-old gardens

Occasionally, a garden will go dormant until prices rebound or a neighboring garden takes them over. Such was the case at the Ambootia estate where tea was first planted in 1861. After several years of dormancy, this rejuvenated estate is one of two premier bio-dynamic farming operations found in Darjeeling. Using a holistic approach, farming is

seen as the interdependent development of minerals, plants, animals and positive cosmic forces that allow nature to bring agriculture to life.

The Ambootia story makes a great marketing device for western consumers eager to replenish the earth. A walk through the nursery there is unlike anything I had ever seen. Rows of young tea saplings, cloned from original “mother bushes,” are nurtured here until they are ready for transplanting in the fields. They take the place of low-yield or diseased bushes that have been dug and removed. The discarded bush could be 40 to 100-years-old.

These tender saplings begin their lives in bamboo-covered beds where they are protected from the harsh summer sun and the late afternoon hail that can quickly defoliate a tea bush or kill a small-stemmed plant.

Heaps of cattle horns are mounded around a shed waiting to be filled with organic fertilizer and buried in autumn throughout the gardens. These potent capsules slowly release their nutrients and feed the tea plant roots over the winter.

Cow manure and composted grass clippings also are used throughout the gardens. Even herbs are strategically planted to discourage damaging insects and aid soil stabilization. (Landslides are a common occurrence on the steep slopes of Darjeeling’s mountains.) No commercial fertilizers or insecticides are used on this environment-friendly estate.



Not every garden has can afford to make such a drastic change in philosophy. It takes a tremendous amount of money to revitalize an estate with 370 acres of planted tea shrubs that support over 4,000 people (workers and their families). It can take three times as many workers to staff a bio-dynamic estate as compared to a traditional estate.

Keeping the unique muscatel taste alive

Gardens cannot simply uproot their oldest shrubs and plant all new bushes without jeopardizing the characteristic muscatel taste of Darjeeling teas. Zafar Ahmad Ali faced a critical low-yield problem when he became manager of the Castleton Tea Garden in 1999. Many of his 100-year-old bushes were severely damaged by moss, stem borer infestations, and poor pruning over the years. These valuable China jat bushes, original to the garden, were needed to maintain the muscatel overtones so prized in exceptional Darjeeling teas. They were being uprooted and replaced by clonal plants that would take up to six years to begin producing.

Mr. Ali explained, “By uprooting and replanting, we were planting clonal teas which are not synonymous to Darjeeling. The connoisseurs of Darjeeling tea are not in favor of this

new flavor and they advised us that, in order for us to maintain our unique identity in the international market, we had to maintain our original China flavor.”

He found that the root systems of these original bushes were very much alive but the trunk of the plant was being girdled by trunk tumors just below the surface of the soil. His discovery led him to begin a campaign of pulling back the soil and cutting away the bush, trunk and tumor. This allowed the roots to put out new shoots while maintaining the integrity of the famous muscatel characteristic. The cost for bringing these fields back to life was half the cost of uprooting and replanting.

One has to only look out over the older tea fields to see obvious effects of aging. Scattered empty spots abound where bushes have been uprooted and not replaced. This valuable vacant land wastes hundreds of acres of tillable soil where tea could be growing. The yield from these spotted fields is much less and the picker’s time is wasted moving from bush to bush. Fortunately, the Tea Board of India is giving estates planting subsidies to infill these gaps. In fact, the Tea Board is spending millions of dollars annually to research better growing methods and subsidize replanting and infilling for many of these older gardens. The board’s Darjeeling Tea Research and Development Center offers cultivation and production assistance and incentives to all gardens which will take advantage of their expertise.

Protecting the champagne of black teas

Origin names such as Scotch, Champagne, or Darjeeling instantly communicate a certain cachet. These appellations speak volumes of information to consumers. Consequently, the perceived value of these drinks is generally higher than their generic counterparts. Each beverage reflects its origin and environment in its taste.

This is also true of Darjeeling tea. No other tea in the world carries the distinctive muscatel overtones and bright coppery color of a tea from the Darjeeling region of upper India. Its appearance, liquor and aroma are instantly recognizable by tea drinkers worldwide. A Darjeeling China bush will not produce the same muscatel tones if taken from its nest on the mountain and planted in the lowlands of Doars or Assam. Darjeeling teas owe their unique flavor partly to the type of bush and partly to the climate.

The 86 gardens found in the Darjeeling region annually produce around 10 million kilograms of tea. Yet it is estimated that 40 million kilograms of tea, often marked as “Pure Darjeeling,” finds its way into the market each year. This counterfeit tea may be a copper-colored light tea grown and processed in Sri Lanka or Kenya, or it might be tea brought across the mountains from neighboring Nepal or Bhutan. The Tea Board of India and the Darjeeling Planters Association have decided that to protect their unequalled reputation - and prices - their product must be trademarked and verified.

To make the name Darjeeling distinctive, the Tea Board of India has designed a logo now used by all producers, packers and exporters of Darjeeling tea. Application must be made with the Tea Board of India for its use. Minimal fees, based on tonnage sold, are collected in exchange for the right to use the



mark in packaging or advertising. Hopefully, this branding will give assurance to consumers that they are buying authentic Darjeeling tea.

What does the future hold for darjeeling teas?

How will Darjeeling tea come out of this current economic slump? Darjeeling's gardens have large quantities of monsoon and autumnal teas to sell. These good quality monsoon and autumnal teas bring much lower prices than the prized early pickings, leading to great values for the American market. I also see a growing American market for top quality Darjeeling teas. Our evolving tea drinkers, like single malt scotch and single-barrel bourbon collectors, are looking for rare, one-of-a-kind offerings like single-estate first and second flush darjeelings. The prices for high quality teas are sure to increase.



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