

TEA COUNTRIES—
China still holds other foremost places as a tea-producing country. In days gone by practically all the tea consumed throughout the world was grown in China, and to-day that country produces three hundred million pounds, that is to say about two-thirds of the entire world crop, which amounts to four hundred and fifty million pounds annually. While it is conceded that the plant is a native of Assam, where it grows wild and to a great height, it was carried to China and transplanted there so many years ago that the general belief is that the bush originally grew in the latter country in its wild state.

In fact, though it is only because the soil received it graciously and the people of the country took up its cultivation, that China and tea have become almost inseparably connected.

In China the same methods are employed to-day as were in vogue a hundred years ago, and we may thank the Ceylon planters for the introduction of cleanliness in the preparation of tea. In Ceylon modern methods and modern ideas are applied, with the result that the only manual labor of importance is the picking. This is a very delicate operation, and it would seem that it will always have to be done by hand. The pickers, who are carefully trained, pass down the lines of bushes, pinching off the leaves between the thumb-nail and fore-finger. These leaves grow on slender shoots, and the sizes determine the various grades. The small leaf at the top is known as the Flower Pekoe, the next larger the Orange Pekoe, the third leaf Pekoe, the three combined making the Pekoe tea of commerce. The next two leaves furnish Souchong, and are known as first and second Souchong. And here it might be said that the general idea that 'Gunpowder,' as applied to tea, means the best and highest grade, is incorrect. As a matter of fact, the term merely applies to the method of rolling. Gunpowder tea being rolled in balls. The resumption of the pickers is determined by the weight of the baskets they bring in, and in order to prevent the plucking of old leaves, they are fined for any large ones found in their pickings.

When the baskets are filled they are brought to the withering lofts, great rooms fitted up with lattice-work shelves, in which the leaves are left for several hours in order that the moisture may be evaporated. Care is taken, however, to regulate the hot air circulated through these fraries, so that the leaves may not become too dry and break in the course of rolling, which is the next step.

The rollers consist of two plane surfaces of wood whose action is similar to that of millstones, but the intervening space is large enough to prevent the grinding of the leaf. The rolling finished, the tea is spread out and permitted to ferment, and when it has been subjected to the oxidising influence of the air for a short time it is placed in firing boxes.

The old method of firing and the one still used in China, is known as 'pan,' or 'basket firing.' This is done by hand, the pans or baskets being held over fires by coolies, usually stripped to the waist. In Ceylon the firing is done by machinery, cleanliness being thus assured. Moreover, the tea, not being subjected to the direct fire, is less likely to lose any of its essential qualities. Of course, much time is saved in the modern tea plantation; the whole operation from the time the tea is withered up to the stage which we have now reached, being completed in the course of two hours.

Now this is the process of fermentation, by the way, which determines whether the tea is to be green or black—the black being permitted to ferment longer than the green. The next operation is sorting. I passed through graduated sieves, the various grades are separated, the tea is again fired for a short time, and then the finished product is packed in lead-lined boxes ready for shipment. If the tea is to be shipped a long distance through a damp country or across the water, it must be fired high in order to prevent mildew. As high firing is injurious to the quality it is a rare thing for the better grades to be sent any great distances. Of the Chinese product most of the best remains in that country, and is consumed by the mandarins who are connoisseurs, and do not hesitate to pay £10 and more per pound. Some good grades are sent to Russia, about much lower grade tea is made into bricks for this trade. These are prepared in large factories. The tea is ground and steamed until it becomes soft and mushy, when it is pressed into bricks and dried by steam, the finished product being almost as hard as the commercial brick with which we are familiar.

The flavor of tea depends largely upon the section in which it is grown. There is one little portion of Formosa, for in-

stance, which produces the most delicious tea, and there are regions south of the Yangtze Kiang where it is almost worth its weight in gold. The Ceylon tea is similar in taste to Indian tea, which was already popular when it first came into the market.

TEA AND MUDJEK
Apropos of different varieties of tea the following is an account of the discovery of a method of preparing tea which was very popular in the United Kingdom a quarter of a century ago, viz. Congow. It is related that on a plantation in China a certain lot of tea was carelessly permitted to ferment before it was cured. The grower was about to throw it away when his more thrifty partner suggested that it might be just as well to have it dried anyway. The fermented tea was dried and shipped to England, where the tea made an instantaneous success, and the fortunate planter was flooded with orders for the delicious new product. The Chinese, however, sometimes quick to grasp an opportunity, and in this instance they soon discovered economical methods of preparing this tea for the English market.

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