

# It's Time For Tea

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“It's time for tea” and the time is 2737 BC when according to Chinese mythology, tea was discovered accidentally by Shen Nung, the second of three emperors of the San Huang Period (3000-2700 BC). The legend is that he had decreed that all drinking water be boiled as a hygienic precaution. He often traveled and on this particular trip, his entourage had stopped to rest. His servants proceeded to boil water for drinking and leaves from a nearby bush fell into the hot water. The water turned brown and caught the eye of Shen Nung who tasted the new liquid and found it refreshing. The tree was a wild tea bush and so tea was discovered. Since this serendipitous discovery, tea has been an important part of many cultures through the ages.

It was during the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) that tea became the national drink of China and tea consumption spread throughout the Chinese culture and became important to the daily life of the Chinese people.

In 780 AD Lu Yu who was reared by monks in a Buddhist monastery wrote the first definitive book on tea. This work projected him into near sainthood during his lifetime and he to this day is known as the “Tea Saint” to the Chinese.

Lu Yu’s book “Cha Ching” inspired the Zen Buddhist missionaries to create the form of tea service that would later be introduced into Imperial Japan as the Japanese tea ceremony or the way of tea, Chanoyu. The spread of tea cultivation throughout China and Japan is accredited to the movement of Buddhist monks throughout the region during the sixth century.

It was not until 1191, however, that tea took hold in Japan when the Zen priest Eisai returned from China and introduced powdered tea and tea seeds into Japan. The seeds were planted at the Kozaji temple in the hills northwest of Kyoto; and Eisai was named the “Father of Tea” in Japan.

Tea was quickly elevated to an art form with the growing popularity of the Japanese ritual tea ceremony. The ceremony became institutionalized during the

Kamakura period (1192-1333 AD) as tea was used by Zen Buddhist monks to keep themselves awake during meditation.

One of the priests, Murata Shuko (1422-1502) originated the spirit and etiquette and the idea of elegant simplicity to the execution of the tea ceremony. He initiated the serving of tea by tea masters; and in addition he devised the 9 sq yd tea room to serve 5 or 6 guests. This was a significant departure from the gatherings of earlier generations when they were much more elaborate and included large groups of people. Furthermore, Shuko took great pains to study the most aesthetic ways to combine Japanese and Chinese tea cultures and protocol.

The tea culture reached its peak at the end of the Muramachi period (1393-1573). Oda Nobunaga came to power at this time. He opposed the authority of court nobles and was able to take power from their hands. He governed Japan along democratic lines , and during his rule, the middle class expanded, architecture changed to become more distinctively Japanese. Portuguese traders came to Japan during his reign and opened new markets which expanded the economy of Japan. This was

particularly evident in the city of Sakai in the Osaka Prefecture. The city benefitted from the trade with the Portuguese and the West. As a result the tea ceremony changed in Sakai and became more inclusive and available to more people as they had more disposable income and a greater sense of self governance.

There were two leaders of the tea cult in Sakai, Torii Insetsu and Takeno Jo-o. Both were students of Shuko. Jo-o's style and methods spread throughout Japan. The advances made by these tea masters to the tea ceremony were profound. Although the nobles and samurai of Japan continued to serve elaborate meals to accompany their ceremonies, the tea masters of Sakai were introducing greater simplicity in the art of tea. The elaborate tea ceremonies which had been used in earlier generations to court favors from the powerful and the military and to secure political alliances were becoming a thing of the past in most of Japan.

However, at the end of the 1500s and after numerous civil wars, another powerful leader emerged. Hideyoshi conquered the entire country and was appointed regent in 1585. He was a devotee of the tea ceremony and he acted as host at gigantic tea

ceremonies where as many as 800 people attended. These ceremonies spread the popularity of Cha-no-yu very rapidly.

Hideyoshi used the tea ceremony as a method to further his political career and to display the valuable tea utensils he inherited as the successor to Nobunaga. He found intense enjoyment in the art of Cha-no-yu and meditation. He would meditate in a small secluded hut which inspired his building a six foot square tea room in Osaka Castle. His love of the way of tea increased with the passing years and he eventually gave up his position as regent to his son. His last years were spent in seclusion and tranquility.

Tea masters became influential with Japanese rulers. Hideyoshi is but one example of powerful leaders who were influenced and molded by their trusted tea masters. Although Hideyoshi had as many as eight tea masters, it was Sen-no Rikyu, a pupil of Jo-o with his tea ceremony based on the aesthetics of quiet elegance, that was the most pleasing to him. Rikyu became his closest attendant and was granted many favors and power. This caused other tea masters and members of the court to be

jealous of his position. In the end, however, the two men clashed and Hideyoshi ordered Rikyu to commit suicide for having angered him. Rikyu, at age 71, did as he was ordered to do as penance for his transgression. Sen no Rikyu is perhaps the most famous and the tea master of greatest influence over the art of the tea ceremony, Cha-no-yu.

Rikyu had served both Hideyoshi and Nobunaga. He is credited with establishing the rules and ritual of the tea ceremony as it is performed today, but it is plain to see that more than one person was instrumental in the development of the art of Cha-no-yu. The ceremony as we know it today owes its origins not only to the tea masters of Jo-o and Rikyu, but , also, to the people of Sakai, the samurai lords and their contemporaries as well as many powerful rulers and nobles of Japan. The Zen Buddhist monks and the Zen religion and philosophy also greatly influenced the way of tea.

The strong Zen influence can be seen in the spiritual aspect of the tea ceremony. There is a special code of ethics shared by the host and guests which makes cha-no-yu

an art that is distinctly Japanese. In the relationship between the host and his guests, self control and consideration are maintained regardless of social status. All guests are given the same degree of respect. It is a given that a tea master live by a code of correct daily conduct that is free of affectation and arrogance. All this is evidence of the Zen Buddhist influence.

The relationship between Zen and Cha-na-yu can also be seen in the fine arts that surround the tea ceremony, which are calligraphy, painting, pottery and flower arranging. The scrolls that hang in the alcoves of tea rooms stem back to Chinese Zen priests. However, Zen and Cha-no-yu differ in that Zen calls for enlightenment of the individual through meditation and detachment, Cha-no-yu is an art form in which people communicate with each other through sincerity of spirit and purity of mind.

Harmony with nature also forms an essential basis of Cha-no-yu as nature is regarded as the best means of awakening aesthetic appreciation. Therefore, the tea ceremony is associated with the passing of the seasons which determine the utensils, flowers and foods that are used. The ceremony is conducted in accordance with the



different months of the year and all objects must blend harmoniously. In the same spirit the appropriate scroll is chosen for the alcove. In addition the tea master's use of art objects known as "mei" give the ceremony a personal flavor as these objects belong to the tea master and represent their personal taste. It is said that the creativity in Cha-no-yu cannot be taught. It is inbred. One can learn the ritual of the tea ceremony, but it is considered impossible to train someone's mind to increase their creativity. The student must discover for themselves the mysteries of the art.

The tea ceremony has as its objective a relaxed communion between the host and guest. It is based in part on the etiquette and style of serving tea, but it also includes the aforementioned aesthetics. Its ultimate aim is the attainment of a deep spiritual satisfaction through drinking of tea and silent contemplation. Each tea ceremony is to be unique with its own mood that can never be duplicated but the essence always remains the same.

When attending a tea ceremony, footwear is left outside of the entrance to the tea room. The guests are escorted to a waiting room where they admire and study the

hanging scroll, floral decorations and change into clean, white socks in preparation for entering the tea room. The first aroma to greet you when you enter a tea room is the strong sweet fragrance of incense. The incense is either burned in a brazier or in a fire pit that is burning in colder months. In the room the seat in front of the alcove is reserved for the guest of honor. The alcove may contain only a few items but they have been selected with the greatest care and are to be admired by guests.

When food is served, it will not cover the entire dish since the dish itself is an object of art to be admired. Great pains are taken to ensure that the tea articles are displayed to the fullest extent for their artistic value. The meal will consist of several dishes brought out one at a time. The host is complimented on the beauty of the articles and the flavor of the food. The food is cut into unusual shapes and often adorned with flowers and is painstakingly prepared for the occasion.

In a Cha-no-yu gathering, everything that is seen and used is an object to be appreciated; and this applies not only to precious objects but to every day utensils as

well. This attitude is a reflection of knowing that beauty can be found in the imperfect and ordinary as well as in the perfect. This attitude permeates the Japanese character.

If powdered green tea is served, both the host and guests follow certain rules of etiquette. After the guests have finished some food or sweets, the host offers a bowl “matcha”, powdered green tea whipped with hot water. The guest responds by complimenting the host on the taste and appearance of the food and the beauty of the serving dish. When, where, and by whom the bowl was made are important topics of conversation. If the guest is served in a Japanese style room, the hanging scroll and flowers are also commented upon. The origin of the scroll is discussed. This praising and complimenting may seem exaggerated by Western standards. However, in the Japanese culture since the host has gone to great pains to prepare everything, the guest is expected to respond in this manner. This etiquette is part of every day life in Japan and is not something to be observed only at the formal tea gathering. The Japanese way of tea is one of the best ways that one can come to understand the foundations of Japanese culture. According to Sen-o-Rikyu, the greatest and most revered tea master, the guidelines necessary for a host and guest during a tea

gathering are principles that can and should be followed each day. These principles are harmony, respect, purity and tranquility.

The spirit of the tea ceremony is seeking good in others. It is the wisdom that comes from applying knowledge each moment in response to circumstance. It is the host inviting a guest to share peace in a bowl of tea.

After the tea is drunk, the tea bowls are handed back to the host and everything used in the ceremony is cleaned and returned to its proper place. All this is done in a calm manner so that the interest of the guests and quietness of the atmosphere does not change. The end of the ceremony is signified when the host covers the water jar with a lid. The guests should feel satisfied with both the excellent tea and the performance of the host.

At this point the guests may ask the host for permission to examine the articles that have been used. When the guests have looked at the different items, they return them to their original places. While this is being done the host waits outside the room. When the host returns, the utensils are carried away. This is the time when

conversation between the host and the guests begins and questions are asked. If no questions are asked, it is a sign that the spirit of the ceremony was not successful.

There are various types of tea ceremonies: The noon ceremony is the most formal and in it there is a greater amount of protocol and choreography. The dawn ceremony is usually performed to say farewell to a friend and is most often held in winter. For this the guests arrive between three and four in the morning. The evening ceremony is held on long wintry nights and is usually preceded by leisurely conversation between the host and guests. It is normal on these occasions to light the room with lanterns made of wood and paper. Flowers are not used as the light from the lanterns distort the color of the flowers. The early morning ceremony is only held in the summer months, usually between five and six in the morning. This is usually a shortened ceremony. The mealtime ceremony is held before or after meals and only sweets are served. After the sweets, a bowl of clear soup will be drunk and a cup of sake passed around. The ceremony is abbreviated but most enjoyable.

Special tea ceremonies are usually held for distinguished visitors when the host uses his most prized utensils. Impromptu ceremonies may occur during auspicious moments such as viewing a full moon, the snow, cherry trees in bloom or when a friend arrives unexpectedly. Since the gathering is held without prior notice, it is not necessary for everything to be as formal.

There are three main steps for the tea master to follow in all types of ceremonies; First the arrangement of the utensils must be such that everything functions smoothly. Second is the wiping of the utensils which is an important act to signify a spiritual cleansing of the mind and signifies that all thoughts of the temporal world are dismissed. Third, and most importantly, is the making of the tea. For it is all in vain if the tea in the end does not taste good.

Floral arrangements for tea ceremonies are called "chabana". In chabana flowers are put simply in a vase in their natural state. This is distinctly different from ikebana, the traditional Japanese art of flower arranging. In chabana usually one

species of flowers are used, and the vase itself is an object of appreciation. In ikebana the importance is solely on the flowers and their arrangement.

Since early times all sorts of rooms have been used for tea drinking.

There are four different styles of tea architecture: The large drawing room, the soan hut, the elegant room that appealed to the samurai, and the aristocrat's tea pavilion.

The soan style is often felt to be the only true tea room. The soan style is based on a simple log structure. There are no gaudy decorations and no artificial elements in the construction. The soan style tea room or tea house always faces south and is built of natural materials: mud, straw, logs and rough wood.

Tea houses today follow ancient designs in choice of materials. However, it is difficult today to find materials and few carpenters have the necessary skills. The modern tea house still follows the characteristics of asymmetry and the use of natural woods and hidden posts. They do, however, require concrete foundations and the result is a permanent, solid, heavier appearance. They can hardly be called soan in

the true sense the word. Houses styled naturally and without artifice differ greatly from those produced through modern techniques of imitation.

The garden surrounding the tea house may be viewed from a seated position within the house. The stones, plants and lanterns in the garden are all precisely placed for a purpose. The plants are chosen to not distract from the mood of the tea ceremony. This explains why blooming plants are sparsely used. Since early times the ground in most tea gardens are covered in moss or bamboo bushes in order to remind the viewer of mountain scenery. One of the rules of the tea ceremony is that the garden should be kept fresh and green through constant sprinkling with water. This is done to enhance the beauty of the garden and to enable moss to grow. The gardens are constructed to reflect the beauty and spiritual significance of the tea ceremony.

I have related but a few noteworthy features of the Japanese tea house gardens, but this subject could easily demand another Quest paper. The garden must be in harmony with the tea house in scope, style and mood and all aspects of the tea house architecture.



In closing may I leave you with these last thoughts that every element, every experience of Cha-no-yu is designed to foster and interpret the critical link of Japanese culture to the tea ceremony. Peace, harmony and purity all come together in quiet elegance through the way of tea.

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