

The Perplexing and Wonderful Complications of Tea

The Story of Tea:

A Cultural History and Drinking Guide

by Mary Lou Heiss & Robert J. Heiss, 417 pages, Ten Speed Press, hardcover, \$29.95 (2007).

Tea: Aromas and

Flavors Around the World

by Lydia Gautier, photographs by Jean-François Mallet, 189 pages, Chronicle Books, hardcover, \$40 (2006).

Since 1935, when William Ukers's brilliant, indispensable two-volume treatise *All About Tea* appeared, there has been a dearth of comprehensive English-language books on the subject. The gap begins to be filled by Mary Lou and Robert J. Heiss's *The Story of Tea* and Lydia Gautier's *Tea*, largely because they focus on taste. For the Heisses, "Tea is a balancing act between flavor and aroma that carries in its essence the singular stamp of the culture that produced it."

Both books begin by briefly covering the development of the world's tea cultures from China to Japan, then to Southeast Asia, Africa, and finally to the West. In *The Story of Tea*, some of the most pleasurable reading is the description of the Heisses' journey along the tea trail. They cover the major (and sometimes less than major) tea regions, with some omissions (Lishan in Taiwan is a glaring one) and some inaccuracies (in discussing Longjing teas, the Heisses seem to indicate that Lion Peak and Shi Feng are different regions, when Lion Peak is simply the English translation), but on the whole the explanations are complete and informative. Occasionally you feel you are listening to a neighbor drone on about

Brian Chao



Mary Lou and Robert J. Heiss

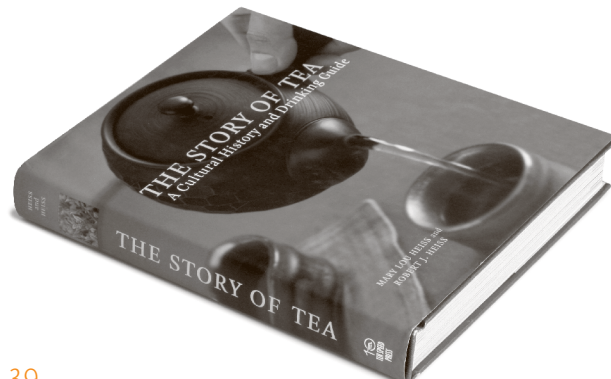
what he did on vacation, but by far the largest sections here, often in the form of sidebars, enrich our understanding by introducing us to colorful regions and personalities. (Madame Wei "has been known to gently slap a person's hand if she sees him or her reaching for a second sip of a cup of tea that she finds inferior.") Gautier in *Tea* covers much of the same material but she lacks the space to paint as detailed a picture.

Tea comes from two main botanical subspecies: China (*Camellia sinensis sinensis*) and Assam (*Camellia sinensis assamica*). The China bush grows, unsurprisingly, in China, including Taiwan, as well as in Japan and the Darjeeling region of India. The Assam bush appears alongside the China bush in both Taiwan and Darjeeling, and it dominates plantings in the rest of India as well as in

Sri Lanka, Kenya, and most of the New World. Each of these subspecies embraces hundreds of different cultivars, whose names often reflect the cultural milieu and the mythology surrounding the teas. A number of cultivars, such as *tieguanyin* and *jin xuan*, lend their names to the teas they produce.

A large obstacle to understanding great tea, especially from China and Taiwan, is the confusing way teas are named: sometimes after the region in which they are produced, sometimes after the cultivar from which they are produced, at other times after the appearance of the dry leaf, and sometimes from a combination of the three. A further problem can arise from the way the Chinese names are romanized and subsequently translated into English. Ordering can be difficult when teas are given fanciful English names with little relation to the original Chinese, as often happens. (More simply, Indian and Ceylonese teas traditionally have been named after the estate on which the plants are grown.)

In keeping with geography's powerful influence on taste, both books touch on the thorny concept of terroir. Perhaps because Gautier is an agronomist with a solid wine background (and French — terroir is a French term after all), she is stronger here than the Heisses. Terroir, which is responsible for the "somewhereness" that we look

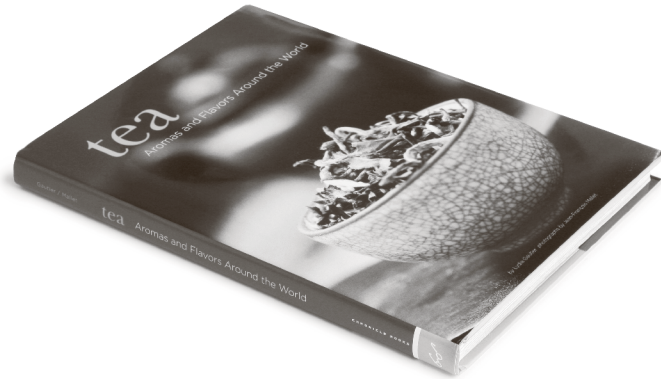


for in tea, wine, and many other foods, helps explain why, for example, a high-grown, lightly oxidized oolong from Anxi in China, does not taste like one grown in Alishan in Taiwan. Tea farmers have long claimed that some sites produce better products than others. On too many occasions, the Heisses come close to saying that teas taste different because of terroir and that we know that terroir exists because the teas taste different (they even say that when there are no real differences in taste, then the terroir must be the same).

Once harvested, tea must be processed. The discussions in both books are required reading for anyone wishing to understand fine tea. As the Heisses explain, each of the six major tea categories has its own manufacturing method. Although there are significant regional variations, a grasp of the basics provides the necessary foundation for understanding why different teas taste different. The six major types are: green, yellow, white, oolong (or *qing cha* — blue-green tea), black (called red in China), and pu-erh (called black in China).

The differences among categories primarily reflect the degree to which the leaves are oxidized. Oxidation is routinely — and incorrectly — called fermentation. The distinction, the Heisses point out, is worth making. Green and yellow teas are not oxidized, white teas are very slightly oxidized, oolong teas are anywhere from about 20 percent (some Wenshan *baozhong* is less) to about 80 percent oxidized, and black teas are fully oxidized. Pu-erhs are a special case; some are oxidized and others not, and, besides, they are the only teas that undergo a true bacterial fermentation.

Significant flavor differences come



from other aspects of processing. Most undergo a “firing” to dry the leaf and destroy the enzymes that allow oxidation. Dry heat may be applied to leaves in a wok (pan firing) or in a basket held over a fire, or the firing may be done in a rolling drum. Alternatively, the enzymes are destroyed by wet heat: steam helps to give Japanese green teas their singular vegetal taste and bright color. Yellow teas are both steamed and fired, which gives them much of their special character. Green teas and black teas are fired, while white tea is instead simply dried (traditionally air dried, but many modern types are oven dried; the lack of firing explains why these teas are very slightly oxidized).

Before they move on to brewing, the Heisses serve up useful advice on buying and storing. The former can be summed up as: *deal only with reputable merchants*. The couple wisely recommends buying tea in small lots and storing it away from light in a cool location.

But brewing... oh, brewing. The heart of any tea book must be its chapters on brewing and tasting. Three variables are paramount: tea quantity in relation to water, water temperature, and steeping time. (Water quality is also important, as the authors acknowledge, although they do not devote much space to it.) Alas, those searching for the Holy Grail will be sorely disappointed,

for here differences between the two books show up; there are no firm and fast directions that will give an excellent brew in every circumstance.

The Heisses begin with the fine-sounding claim that a pound of tea “regardless of variety, always yields 200 ‘measures’ of tea,” which is no more helpful than saying that every pound of tea weighs 16 ounces. A pound is 454 grams; a “measure” weighs 2.25 grams (the trade uses this rounded figure), although in most places the Heisses call for 2 grams. It happens that 2.2 grams is about the amount of tea in a standard US tea bag.

But is that the right amount? It all depends on the amount of water. Gautier also uses the 2-gram measure as a base, but where the Heisses use it to brew 6 fluid ounces, or 18 centiliters, of tea, Gautier brews only 10 centiliters. In other words, Gautier uses 80 percent more tea! When I followed the suggestions of each book, including temperature and steeping time, and compared results, I preferred the teas brewed with the larger amount of leaf — but I didn’t always like them brewed at the temperature or for the amount of time that Gautier suggests.

Gautier essentially recommends only two temperatures — 158 degrees F (70 degrees C) for white, green, and yellow teas and 203 degrees F (95 degrees C) for oolong, black, and pu-erh. The latter is far too hot for

brewing most oolongs and certainly for uncooked pu-erhs. An uncooked pu-erh brewed at 200 degrees F or more will be fiercely bitter, and a cooked one brewed at 180 degrees F will just taste of earth. The Heisses don't distinguish between cooked and uncooked pu-erhs either, but their recommendations are more nuanced.

As to steeping time, the authors are all more or less in agreement for most teas (although Gautier suggests that green teas should be steeped for 1 to 5 minutes, which is akin to saying that Chicago is somewhere between New York and Seattle). On white teas, however, the Heisses counsel 1½ to 2 minutes, while Gautier suggests 5 to 8. And remember that Gautier is using far more tea. The lesson: brewing is a matter of taste and you must experiment with the variables to arrive at what you like best.

To understand taste, the important factors to consider are balance and complexity. Gautier writes that “in the Chinese tradition, balance in tea is based on two qualities that must be in harmony: bitter (*ku*) and sweet (*gan*).” That's not sweetness in the sugary sense, but a full softness and “fruitiness” of the leaf. A simple balanced tea is much more enjoyable than a complex one that lacks balance.

So, which book? Both! The Heisses take us on an extended tour that, if at times it seems a little ponderous, nevertheless provides a storehouse of information. The sections on tea manufacturing are the best available to date by far. Gautier is more analytical, and her book's stunning photography alone is worth the price. Both books ably explore and significantly extend the trail that was blazed by Ukers long ago.

— David Campbell

Counter Culture: Knowing Sushi

The Sushi Experience

by Hiroko Shimbo, 260 pages, Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover, \$40 (2006).

Japanese Cooking: A Simple Art,

Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition
by Shizuo Tsuji, 489 pages, Kodansha International, hardcover, \$45 (2006).

During the four years I lived in Tokyo, I cooked a lot of Japanese food in my tiny kitchen — *nabe* (one-pot stew) with oysters and udon simmered on my Bunsen burner of a stove, tofu (hot in winter, cold with soy and bonito flakes in summer), pan-seared or sake-simmered mackerel or flounder, and sometimes tofu or eggplant topped with miso and broiled in a toaster oven. I ate plenty of *natto* (fermented soybeans), and I always made rice — but with all that cooking I never made sushi at home. In fact, I never had sushi in anyone else's home. I enjoyed the clean, fresh tastes and diverse textures of sushi with friends only at a *sushiya*, or sushi restaurant.

Not long ago I mentioned this to several Japanese friends, who all commented that their mothers had made sushi on special occasions, such as Girls' or Boys' Day, but that they themselves almost never did. Yuriko Kuchiki, a journalist and author, and a friend with whom I've shared more excellent Japanese meals than I can count, said the effort is *mendokusai* — troublesome and time-consuming. Her mother “suffered through” making sushi once a year from the time Yuriko was four until she was 20. For sentimental reasons, Yuriko sometimes misses and seeks out the mixed *chirashizushi* or rolled *makizushi* of her youth, but eating them, she said,

only makes her want “real” sushi, which later made me wonder what she meant by “real.”

Sushi's culinary, aesthetic, and stylistic development mirrored only Japanese culture until the end of World War II and the period of occupation, when US forces closed sushi restaurants to deal with rice shortages, but then allowed them to reopen (using only rationed rice brought by customers) on the grounds that sushi was as culturally important to the Japanese as sandwiches were to Americans. The American soldiers were among the best sushi customers. After the war, it didn't take long for the first sushi restaurant to open in the US — sometime between 1949 and the late 1960s, depending on whose account you believe.

Now sushi is so mainstream that Wal-Mart sells it, and it can have some distinctly non-Japanese ingredients, such as brown rice, California avocado, Philadelphia cream cheese, jalapeño peppers, Vietnamese sriracha sauce, mango, and foie gras, that have turned sushi into global cuisine, with fast-growing markets for it in the US, UK, Thailand, China, and Russia. In Japan, experiments have been made with reindeer meat and horse meat as lower-cost alternatives to the overfished and increasingly pricey tuna so identified with sushi. Although tuna was common in sushi prior to the Second World War, the fatty belly, *toro*, was not used because even in an icebox it spoiled quickly and because it was not appealing to Japanese, who prefer leaner foods that convey umami, the “fifth taste” found in such items as dried kelp and dried bonito. Today, however, Westerners swoon over the rich creamy tastes of *chu-toro* and *o-toro* and they are sushi standard-bearers in Japan and elsewhere.