

TIME FOR *tea*

A good cup of tea is one of life's greatest simple pleasures. **Olivia Greenway** tracks the history of our national drink and discovers the best places to enjoy afternoon tea



At the prestigious Salon de Thé in Paris in March 2015, the gold award winner – for a delicate white smoked tea – was not a company in China or Sri Lanka, but a Scottish estate in the Highlands owned by the Wee Tea Plantation. In 300 years, we have gone from a country that didn't drink tea to one of the largest tea drinkers in the world. Now it appears, we are also pretty good at growing it.

But how did Britain first come to drink it? Tea – or black tea as we commonly know it – is produced from the cured leaves of the *Camellia Sinensis* shrub native to Asia. Boiling water is poured over the leaves to make the drink. Next to water, tea is the world's most preferred drink.

An advertisement appeared in London in 1658, directing customers to Sweetings Rents near the Royal Exchange. It read "approved China Drink called tcha, by other nations tay, or tee..." By all accounts, the tea was not served particularly well and as coffee houses were also springing up, Londoners were not immediately impressed.

The Portuguese however, being the first to discover a sea route to the

East, had become big tea drinkers. So when Charles II married Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza in 1662, drinking her favourite beverage became fashionable. Tea at this time was only for the wealthy. A pound of tea in 1664 cost forty times the price of a decent meal. The rich kept their tea in beautiful wooden lead lined locked boxes. These are highly collectable now.

Tea was heavily taxed and smuggling became rife. At one point, it was estimated that more tea was being smuggled than was being imported legally. William Pitt the Younger, under pressure from tea merchants, agreed to reduce the tax on tea; in 1794 it was reduced from nearly 120 percent to 12.5 percent. Smuggling stopped almost immediately. By now the nation were tea drinkers, but poorer people used the tealeaves over and over again and drank their tea weak with milk and sugar, a new import from the West Indies.

Afternoon tea (having food with tea) is said to have been invented by Anna, the Duchess of Bedford, in 1841. She often had an energy dip late afternoon and wanted just a little snack to keep her going until dinner. So she popularised



The Balmoral

the practice of eating sandwiches with the crusts removed, dainty scones with jam and cream and small English buns and cakes. It was an ideal opportunity for society women to show off their best china and fine tea dresses (more comfortable than evening dresses) and allows others to catch a glimpse of their fashionable homes. It was convention for the hostess to pour the tea but for others to pass the tea around.

In 1851, nearly all imported tea came from China. With the establishment of tea plantations in Ceylon and India, tea became cheaper and by 1901 we were drinking 6lbs per head annually, a three-fold increase from fifty years earlier. For a time, Lyons Corner Houses, decorated in Art Deco style, dominated many large cities. These teashops employed waitresses dressed in black with a white apron. They were known 'Nippies', so-called because the shops were very busy and there was no time for slacking. After the Second World War, the shops converted to cafeteria service and the last one closed down in 1977.

The tea bag arrived in the UK in the 1950s. An American tea merchant developed it by accident. Sending samples of his tea to customers in small silk bags, one of them didn't realise he was supposed to remove the

contents first. He reported that the tea was very good. Most of us can only remember leaf tea in our childhood – my uncle claimed the old leaves were good for his roses and I remember him scattering them onto the earth from the tea pot; in the 1960s only 3 percent of tea sold was in bags. By 2007, it had increased to 96 percent.

In recent years however, loose tea has been making something of a comeback. Standard black tea is declining in popularity, but blended speciality teas are on the rise. The perceived health benefits, reduced caffeine compared to coffee and the delicious varieties easily available now of not just black blended tea but white tea and other varieties have made it popular with all ages.

Concern over the welfare of tea pickers (and other manual low paid workers) resulted in the Fairtrade Foundation being established in 1992 by a group of humanitarian and charity organisations, soon joined by the WI and other groups. Over 4000 Fairtrade foodstuffs are now available in most major supermarkets and carry the Fairtrade Certification Mark.

That the Wee Tea Plantation scooped top prize in 2015 was a surprise for its owners, who only started growing tea in 2010 and

had a disastrous winter in 2012 that nearly ruined their whole crop. They now grow around a ton of tea annually and through the Wee Tea Company supply Fortnum & Mason, The Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh and The Lowell in New York, as well as sell online (theweeteacompany.com).

They have successfully managed to grow a rare commodity and sell at a high price, ironically, mostly to China. From three plants in 2010, they planted 20,000 for 2015. The tea bushes on the estate benefit from clear mountain air and a rich, peat-based soil. The delicate white tealeaves are also lightly smoked with beech wood.

They grow Dalreoch single estate white tea and also smoke it – Dalreoch white smoked (the gold award winner). The Wee Tea Company also sells crop from two other small Scottish producers, with more producers coming on board for 2015.

Jamie Russell, master blender at the Wee Tea Company, has given several talks on tea to local Women's Rural Institutes members in the Fife area. In his expert opinion, should tea be drunk with milk? "Delicate tea, such as white tea is probably better without, but a strong black blend, such as a breakfast blend, would benefit from a splash of milk." ■



JUST ADD CAKE: SUPER SPOTS FOR AFTERNOON TEA

Traditional British afternoon tea is a treat for most people and not to be rushed, so allow two hours. Booking is recommended. Afternoon tea comprises a variety of finger sandwiches with crusts removed (often ham, cucumber, smoked salmon and egg mayonnaise) scones with homemade strawberry jam and clotted cream and a choice of traditional cakes such as Victoria sandwich or rich fruitcake. The modern practice of including patisserie items is regrettable. They are often too sweet and detract from the flavour of the tea. One is usually offered a choice of tea from a wide selection and complimentary top-ups of tea and food, so arrive hungry.

THE BALMORAL HOTEL, EDINBURGH

(noon to 5.30pm daily, roccofortehotels.com)

In the Palm Court, to the accompaniment of a harpist (from 2pm in the summer and at weekends in the winter) they have been serving superb award-winning afternoon teas since 1901. You may also try the rare smoked white Wee Tea Company gold award winner here.

THE GORING, LONDON

(3pm to 4pm daily, the goring.com)

A decidedly elegant indulgence with polite tent cards advising you to turn off your phone and put your business papers away – this is tea time. Popular with the Royal Family, thanks to its proximity to Buckingham Palace (the then Kate Middleton stayed at The Goring the night before her wedding to Prince William), it's surprisingly unstuffy and quietly delightful.

BROWN'S HOTEL, MAYFAIR, LONDON

(noon to 6pm daily, roccofortehotels.com)

In a series of inter-connecting rooms, with working fireplaces and plenty of light, an occasional pianist offers soothing entertainment. Attentive service from caring staff, don't miss the traditional cakes on the trolley. Refills of everything are pressed upon you.

THE SAVOY, LONDON

(10am to 6.30 pm weekdays, later on weekends, fairmont.com/savoy-london)

In a large salon with well-spaced tables, a pianist will help to melt away your everyday cares. Biddable staff and an excellent tea, served at a pace to suit you and your guest.

THE CHESTER GROSVENOR, CHESTER

(12 noon to 4.30pm daily, chestergrosvenor.com)

Having just celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2015, the hotel has had plenty of years to refine its afternoon tea. Served in the quieter Arkle Bar and Lounge, guests come for miles to enjoy this special treat (no children under 12 years).

BETTYS TEAROOM, HARROGATE

(9am to 9pm daily, bettys.co.uk)

The Original Bettys, (there are now six) this one is in a historic stone building overlooking the Stray – a landscaped area with flowers and trees. Along with sandwiches and cakes, there are scones with Yorkshire clotted cream.

RICHMOND TEA ROOMS, MANCHESTER

(11am to 10pm daily, richmondtearooms.com)

The atmosphere may be more casual but the tea and cakes are serious. Doorsteps of homemade favourites – such as Victoria sandwich, coffee and walnut or lemon drizzle are washed down with a wide selection of leaf teas.