

ISSUES & IDEAS

Tea is the hallmark of civilization

It's a beverage with a fascinating history and it's the world's favourite drink because it's affordable

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VANCOUVER SUN



About 150 years ago, trekking the rugged, snowy wastes of Baffin Island, American adventurer Captain Charles Francis Hall gratefully accepted shelter with an Inuit.

Hall had arrived in the Arctic in the spring of 1860 seeking evidence of Sir John Franklin's missing expedition. The British explorer had vanished 15 years before. Now Hall was in dangerous, uncharted terrain, a 19th-century Indiana Jones tracking an Inuit legend about mysterious objects they'd found.

His account of the mission, which found not Franklin but relics from Sir Martin Frobisher, 300 years earlier, tells of how his host's wife, Tookoolito, bustled in, produced a kettle and set water boiling.

"She asked me if I drank tea," Hall noted. "Drawing her hand from a little tin box, she displayed it full of fine-flavoured black tea, saying, 'Do you like your tea strong?'"

"I'll take it weak, if you please," he answered, astonished, yet still a gentleman. Hall thought tea must be a rare and precious commodity and that the offer of a cup represented extraordinary generosity. So he extracted from his pocket his last sea-biscuit and politely invited her to share.

There, amid the snows of the North, under an Esquimaux's hospitable tent, in company with Esquimaux, for the first time I shared with them in that soothing, cheering, invigorating emblem of civilization — TEA.

To Hall, civilized society is where you find afternoon tea — and that wasn't necessarily in the salons of Paris, London or New York. So Tookoolito and the captain, sharing between them her one cup and his one biscuit, chatted as though he were making a formal call on a society lady back in Cincinnati.

If there's a more Canadian story that encapsulates the rich social history of tea, I don't know what it might be, although there will doubtless be a tale or two at the big Coffee and Tea Show that opens today and runs tomorrow at the Vancouver Convention Centre.

Tea has been the elixir of Chinese sages and a relief for Royal Navy sailors on a North Sea dog watch. It's comforted Australian soldiers in the sinking sloop of a First World War trench and graced the elegant parlours of 18th-century French courtesans.

Accompanied by pressed cucumber sandwiches, it has refreshed Sri Lankan cricketers; hot from the thermos, it has warmed the hands of Irish anglers working the black eddies of a winter trout stream; dispensed from ornate samovars, it has rejuvenated weary Russians on the trans-Siberian railway.

Denie trappers measure bush travel by "teas" — the number of times they take off snowshoes and pause to brew up a hot, sweet restorative.

In B.C. mining camps, in small prairie towns, in upscale urban neighbourhoods from Halifax to Vancouver, women fashioned a more genteel version of the men's smoken — the lemon, strawberry or cream tea social — a na-



Yosief Weldemichael, who has been serving high tea at Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel for 20 years, welcomes guests.

tional institution that survives in places such as Cumberland and Lillooet. Tea has been described as the first drink of imperialism, expanding throughout various Chinese empires, then, after a Portuguese priest encountered it around the time Frobisher was exploring Baffin Island, riding the ships of Europe's mercantile fleets to the far corners of the world.

White, green or black, packaged in bags, as loose leaf, in bricks or as balls that open like ornate flowers, all the varieties of tea — now almost as diverse as the global geography of production — descend from a single shrub that seems to have been first used for medicinal and perhaps meditative purposes in

ancient China.

The first indisputable reference to tea appears about 1,900 years ago in a Chinese instruction book for servants, indicating its growing domestic popularity, although not for another three centuries would demand grow to the point where commercial cultivation was necessary.

By the Tang dynasty, which ruled what was then the world's richest and most powerful empire, tea had become China's most popular drink. It's been plausibly speculated that China's rise under the Tang emperors might be due to the growing popularity of tea. Preparation of the drink required boiling water in an age when waterborne diseases

were endemic. Furthermore, compounds found naturally in tea are antibacterial agents. Perhaps falling mortality drove productivity gains and rising prosperity.

Tea had other legacies. As tea markets boomed in China, merchants began dealing in transactions that involved vast cumbersome sums of money. Paper currency was invented. In some places, tea itself became a currency. Traders at the fringes of empire to whom tea was shipped in brick form remained deeply suspicious of those at the urban centre. They preferred to use tea bricks as cash. Even now, brick tea can be obtained at some specialty purveyors.

Tea Facts

- On average, Canadians drank about 270 cups of tea each, close to nine billion in total, in 2007.
- Green tea consumption is the fastest growing segment of the tea market in Canada, accounting for almost 20 per cent growth over the previous year.
- The Canadian tea market was worth about \$388 million in 2007; B.C.'s was worth \$55 million.
- Restaurants in Canada served almost 352 million cups of hot tea from May 2006 to May 2007.
- Ninety-six per cent of all cups of tea drunk daily in the U.K. are brewed with tea bags; in the U.S., 65 per cent are brewed with tea bags.
- Ninety-eight per cent of U.K. drinkers take their tea with milk; only 30 per cent use sugar.
- Tea is the biggest industrial activity in India after tourism.
- There are 159,190 tea growers in India; 157,504 are small growers cultivating less than 10.12 hectares.
- The world's top three tea exporters are Kenya, China and Sri Lanka.
- About 85 per cent of tea consumed in the U.S. is iced.
- Argentina is the leading tea producer in the Americas.

Sources: Tea Association of Canada; United Kingdom Tea Council; Tea Board of India; Tea Association of the U.S.A.

From China, tea travelled to Japan with a Buddhist monk. Soon it permeated all levels of society, from the humblest households to the courts of the shoguns where it became the subject of the elaborate and complex Japanese Tea Ceremony.

First brought to Europe by Dutch spice merchants, royalty and commoners alike adopted the new drink. Demand drove commerce and tea cultivation was soon established in South Asia and Africa to supplement imports from China. Kenya is now a leading tea producer.

Tea became the focus of fierce corporate competition, the object of trade wars and even a factor in real wars. Britain attempted to pay for its war with the French in North America by raising taxes on commodities, including tea. Protesters dumped a consignment into the sea. The Boston Tea Party became an iconic event in launching the American Revolution.

Although coffee became the popular drink with many Americans, tea merchants expect sales in the U.S. to top \$10 billion in 2010.

American coffee patriots aside, tea is the drink of choice worldwide. One reason for its popularity is price. About 200 cups can be brewed from a half kilogram of tea, which at retail works out to less than 10 cents per cup, an affordable refreshment for most, even in the developing world.

Which helps explain how Tookoolito, whom tea was shipped in brick form remained deeply suspicious of those at the urban centre. They preferred to use tea bricks as cash. Even now, brick tea can be obtained at some specialty purveyors.

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Fiscal responsibility is back at Vancouver City Hall

BY JONATHAN ROSS

For many politicians, the possibility of capturing the public's imagination is a powerful motivator. Presenting a grand vision — take Mayor Gregor Robertson's pledge to end street homelessness by 2015 for example — is often the inspiration behind the decision to run for office. And I, like most Vancouverites, sincerely hope that he succeeds in his efforts to bring shelter to our most vulnerable.

The reality behind political performance, however, is that it consists of just as many aspects of governance that are nowhere near as compelling.

This is particularly true with regards to managing the public purse: responsi-

bility. Before getting into what is currently being undertaken at city hall, let me provide a little context.

Between 2005 and 2008, the operating budget for Vancouver went up by 15.6 per cent, or \$121 million.

Under the regime of former mayor Sam Sullivan, the budget was out of control, including such expenditures as \$12.3 million to establish the 311 information and referral telephone contact centre, \$872,000 in annual costs for the Downtown Ambassador private security program, and \$300,000 for Project Civil City (the majority of which went toward the salary of the appointed commissioner and consultant fees).

Perhaps the most damning example of this record of irresponsibility comes

limited basis to assess financial ability."

Alarmingly, in a commentary published shortly after the last election, Sullivan played down the importance of the project's cost overruns and whether the city would be on the hook for them because "Southeast False Creek is just one development in the citizens' real estate portfolio."

In other words, a billion-dollar project was minimized in importance and as a result, handed over without adequate due diligence on the bidders' ability to pay.

As we are all aware, the global economic crisis has made managing finances, whether personal or public, an exercise in caution and restraint. Vancouver is currently ensnared in a major

City Manager Penny Ballem is being introduced within city hall.

Inefficiencies will be aggressively targeted, including measures such as the amalgamation of the separate groundskeeping crews for the park board and the City of Vancouver, the centralization of the 12 technology help desks that are spread across several departments and the cessation of the practice of stockpiling supplies.

Hiring and pay freezes have been in place since last February. Overtime, travel and training budgets are being cut back dramatically. And, as part of the first round of cost savings identified, 58 full-time positions will be eliminated in 2010.

Capital projects will now be entered into with a new level of oversight and

mer practice that has been disavowed by the new administration.

These are complex decisions that have major implications, and as a result of a new commitment to disclosure by both city council and the city manager, Vancouver residents are being kept well informed of every detail, no matter how difficult.

Of course, the toughest test for this new direction will come in December, when budget estimates will be finalized.

Coun. Raymond Louie, chairman of the city's finance committee, has spoken publicly about keeping any property tax increase to a minimum, which is a commitment that will be dependent on the progress made with the budgetary review and consultation occur-