



## BY INVITATION

RENU KAKKAR

DIRECTOR (CSR),  
APEEJAY SURRENDRA  
GROUP

INDIA is one of the largest tea consuming countries and the second largest tea producer in the world. Eighty per cent of the domestic production is consumed locally as the availability of various other beverages has not dented its market, which continues to grow at 3-4 per cent per annum. Tea has been known to deliver health and wellness benefits making it India's popular habit and recent innovations put tea well on its way to becoming India's beverage of choice. The number of tea brands that have entered the Indian market, many more who have strong interests to make an entry in the near future and the ever growing variety on offer is the result of reinvention of tea, especially green and black. A clear example is the green tea segment, which grew as a fashion trend and its consumption is now sweeping the urban markets. The black tea segment too has stepped up its mojo with new flavours and aromas, making it the go-to-drink right through the day.

Behind it all is the ubiquitous influence of the tea taster. The profession, perhaps one of the most important in the process of what is delivered to the consumer, is quite an enigma. This is a person who seems to have an almost innate sense of differentiating between one tea leaf to another and one impact of an infusion on the palate to another. While all of us are born with five senses, it's the training — a minimum of five years — which it takes for a tea taster to develop the ability to discern aromas, gain an acute sense of flavours and help the tea marketer deliver to the customer's tea cup. A tea taster needs to have the experience of working in tea gardens that gives him the ability to implement quality parameters, introduce corrective measures and learn the art of blending.

Traditionally, one would find tea tasters in West Bengal and South India groomed by agency houses and tea broking firms and many of those veterans are still around. One often hears that a tea taster refrains from smoking or drinking to protect the sense of smell and taste, and palate but veterans say



**LEARNING CURVE:** It is the training — which lasts a minimum of five years — that helps a tea taster develop the ability to discern aromas and gain an acute sense of flavours

# Brewing a perfect cup

Tea tasting is a science that adds health and serenity to lives

this may be a bit of a hyperbole as such a *satvik* life is not necessarily required or in the job description. Whether that is true or not, tea tasting indeed is a bit like meditation — breathe in, 100 per cent concentration, all senses completely in the "now" i.e. the moment when a tea taster takes the infusion in his mouth making a loud sucking sound, which mixes the infusion with plenty of oxygen as it travels in the palate and the tongue. Old tea industry hands who've tasted as many as 800 cups on any given day to judge them on parameters including colour of liquor, clarity, body and aroma, put down the hallmarks of a tea taster to: passion, patience, experience and knowledge.

If there's a tasting rigor in mass-market tea products there is a phenomenal

role that a tea taster plays when delivering for a brand.

Origin of black tea in both the new variants is Assam! Customers have loved their blends. An insight shows their work begins with understanding the type of products the customer is buying — tea and non-tea. The blends created by the mare sent for tea tasting to industry experts — all blind sampling — to garner an unbiased opinion on aroma, taste, colour, strength and finally feel on the palate. Their blends are also sent across India to key category buyers and focus group customers — in blind form again — for their feedback. This long and complicated process of iteration continues till the team arrives at the final product.

While all this sounds like a very exciting job, it's true

that the tribe of professional tea tasters is dwindling. The tea industry laments lack of interest in youth towards choosing tea tasting as a profession. But there is a silver lining! It could mean that the profession is evolving in a way that is customer facing. As specialty tea category grows handsomely along with mass-market products and tea moves from being a popular habit to a lifestyle choice, there is a growing breed of budding professionals — tea sommeliers. Some of them educated in tea and some just learned enthusiasts who have been tea tasters in the past, know also about the culture, presentation, and origin and so on, much beyond identifying teas and tea profiles. They can match or pair teas to a meal or an occasion. In tea-rooms, fine dining restau-

rants or in hotels — they are much sought after, well paid and can be found working with people's palates and personal tastes and tuning people into tea tastes.

A tea-tasting journey with them is strongly recommended. Without giving up on my morning habit of boiled to death soup *chai* of *elaichi*, CTC leaf and milk, I have learned to pair the fabulous 'heath and heather slim-mate' to situations such as 6 am flights, to pair black and green teas to my moods and favourite people and carry all of these teas in tea bags ensconced in a red tea pouch for the last six years at least! Tea tasting is an art that enhances people's experience of the product. Or maybe tea tasting is a science — a science that adds health and perhaps even serenity to people's lives!

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