

優質茶行



THE BEST TEAHOUSE IN BARCELONA

-Antonio Moreno

Starting a tea house with real character, class and fine tea is difficult in the West. But what's even harder is turning one into a mecca for tea lovers from all over, staying open for eleven years and all the while maintaining integrity and devotion to Tea spirit. And Antonio is the main reason why Čaj Chai is one of our favorite commercial tea ventures in the world. But let's dive into Spanish tea culture and some modern history as well...

If you mention tea to your average Spaniard he'll be quick to point out that Spain is a "coffee country" or that Spain has a "coffee culture". I always ask them to think about that for a second: Do we actually have a coffee culture? How many people bother to ask themselves what exactly they are drinking or where it might have been cultivated? At this point, I go out on a limb and say there's probably more people interested in tea culture in Spain than coffee culture because Spain just has a coffee habit! Unfortunately, any discussion on tea will quickly become a tea versus coffee debate if you let it. Unless you're talking to a tea person, of course—a rare but growing breed!

When we opened Čaj Chai in 2004, our modest tea proposal

seemed utterly ridiculous to the overwhelming majority, and they certainly were unashamed to share their skepticism.

"A place specialized in tea? A what? A *tetería*? What is that?" (Note: "*Tetería*" is the word for teahouse... But, since they never heard the word before, they were befuddled, wondering how I could possibly open a business specializing in "*tetas*", or "tits"). Once I'd clarified the matter they'd usually say something like, "Oh, sorry." With a slight contortion of the face, "Do people actually drink tea in Spain?"

Most everyone thought we'd close before the year was through—nobody would have imagined we'd still be here eleven years later. But back then, if I jumped in their skin

a second I could totally understand their logic, if not their conclusion, though certainly not their blatant disregard for polite courtesy before recklessly trampling on our dream. But yes, I really did understand them, at that time, and even today—bars and restaurants open and fold in Barcelona's old town like that's their job!

I've always been an optimist, a dreamer and a bit naïve, too. The concept behind Čaj Chai teahouse was never that of an ordinary teahouse, but of one specialized in importing pure unscented teas from around the world, discerning quality, placing importance on *terroir*, the art of cultivating the Leaf, traditional handmade and handcrafted teas, mindful brewing and



spreading ancient tea culture and wisdom from around the world. We thought that people would appreciate a simple, alcohol-free, calm space—a cultural oasis, in a cosmopolitan city like Barcelona.

I lived in Prague in the 90's. The Czech Republic tends to be known for its beer, but a beautiful new tea culture has started growing there since the 90's, which is a perfect counterpoint to the Bohemian pub culture. Tea houses are ideal places for earlier in the night, or the day after partying, and more recently have become a temple for people in search of some deeper, peaceful hours of repose with something warm.

I moved back to Spain in 2002 and I really missed the tearooms

I had grown accustomed to frequenting in Prague. Being so close to Morocco, the only tearooms you could find were of the Moroccan Whisky and 1001 Nights variety: serving cheap aromatized tea accompanied by hookah (*shisha*) pipes, and a side of blatant disregard for water quality and preparation. Upon my arrival in Barcelona, I began working as a translator and music journalist. My long time partner and soon to become ex-girlfriend was having very serious problems with alcoholism. In a desperate attempt to jump-start her life and renew our relationship, we embarked on a mission to open an authentic teahouse like the ones we loved in her native city of Prague. I thought that if people frequented the existing Barce-

lona teahouses, they surely would flock to one infused with the spirit of Tea, dedicated to quality and culture! We really hoped this would be the beginning of a new chapter, one of new purpose and direction for her, and I trusted the power of our intentions. Ultimately, it *was* a new chapter, for us both, but not how I would have envisioned it, and not all pleasant, of course.

Ay... Those early days weren't easy: our relationship ended terribly twelve months after opening. I was deeply heartbroken, but I persisted with the teahouse despite having never intended it to be my life or livelihood (I envisioned myself a writer and musician). It was very difficult on a personal level, but also economically.

I stopped writing for music magazines immediately, but it wasn't feasible to quit my job translating books. I wasn't able to hire anybody for the teahouse either, since there were so few customers. So, for the first two years I was *always* at the teahouse translating or serving tea, but usually translating. Gradually the weight of these two activities shifted and after two years without a day off I quit the publishing house and dedicated myself exclusively to tea. Recently a tea brother put it this way: if you set up a tearoom business with business in mind and nobody comes you'll be depressed and soon fold. If you set up a tea room with tea in mind and nobody comes you still have delicious tea to enjoy and share!

So you see, Čaj Chai wasn't set up with great economic aspirations as a tea business, but as a tea lifestyle for my partner and an inner confidence that a city like Barcelona could really benefit from good tea. It was a romantic pursuit and Bohemian endeavor. Also, it was extremely difficult on every level: There we were offering nothing but pure artisanal tea—no coffee, no smoking (we're talking years before the anti-tobacco laws were passed), no alcohol, no soft-drinks and not even aromatized tea. They thought we were crazy *and* stupid! In fact, when we opened the only thing keeping us from being a complete entrepreneurial suicide was the sugar on the tables!

Changes in Barcelona

Looking back over the last few years, I feel that Spanish society as a whole has taken steps towards an evolution of consciousness, concern for health and a more open mind towards the unknown. Barcelona has steadily become home to increasingly more vegetarian restaurants, yoga studios and once the anti-tobacco laws were passed,

smokers stopped feeling like they were sacrificing something upon entering a non-smoking space like a tea house. Today, Barcelona is anxious to know more, not just about tea but about everything artisanal. There has been a huge transition! It's not freaky to be a tea drinker anymore. Perhaps it's still strange to be a tea purist as we are, or to think of tea as plant medicine, but when we explain why, transmitting our love for the Leaf, people understand it or, at the very least, they tend to accept it.

More and more people are looking for a moment of peace and quiet, stopping to seek solace in a cup of tea. More and more people are surprised we don't have WIFI, but then understand why a teahouse ought not to have it.

I used to be content to just introduce people to the world of tea at all, but now that tea, the beverage most consumed after water, is becoming fashionable, I feel it's important for people to understand the repercussions of unsustainable cultivation on our Earth and ecosystems. It's more important than ever to purchase responsibly and support organic and sustainable agriculture and the small tea producers who have been performing this intense and beautiful manual labor for hundreds or even thousands of years, supporting ancient tea culture so it isn't lost.

In the last eleven years Spain has seen a huge development in the tea being offered in cafés, restaurants and hotels. It's much more acceptable to be a tea drinker, although more discerning tea lovers will still find it nearly impossible to find a teashop or tearoom that can satisfy them. We've witnessed the shift from teabag to loose tea, although this shift is only beginning and the loose tea is often of very poor quality. I've seen that increasingly younger people are discovering tea, and older generations are also eager to dive into the world of tea and discover its deep, dynamic and cycli-

cal nature. Tea is a living plant and each crop is different, each year is different, each season we meet new friends or reunite with old friends from previous harvests. More and more people are interested in tea ceremonies and even choose to celebrate an occasion with one. Also, more and more people are inquiring about our monthly Global Tea Hut gatherings and our group of supporters is growing beautifully! We are now ten in Barcelona (more in other parts of Spain) and can't wait for Wu De to come for the second time in 2016!

From the heart, I thank all the tea growers of this ancient medicinal plant, guardians of this precious treasure who have dedicated their lives to spreading tea culture and wisdom. I bow before my masters of tea and meditation. I thank everybody who has supported us throughout these years... It's because of you that we are here so many years later.



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