

TEA THE TRANSFORMER

This article is the beginning of an ongoing column that our very own Steve Kokker will be writing. He is a great soul and an amazing author and it is a great honor to share his tea wisdom with all of you from hereon!

Starting a tea importing business in coffee-loving Estonia back in 2004 led to a lot of bemused comments. And living a short skip away from the world's largest coffee consuming nation per capita—Finland—had certainly influenced the small nation of 1.4 million perched atop northeast Europe. The frigid Baltic winds, long, dark winters and languid personalities were great excuses for coffee excesses: “We need strong black coffee here to keep warm and boost energy.”

I didn't quite buy the reasoning—if neighbors in next-door St. Petersburg, with a climate even less forgiving than Estonia's, or in nearby Riga, Latvia, can fill tea salons, why would Estonia be so tea-impermeable? In any case, why let stats and naysayers block passion? Having had no prior business experience, I also had no definite business goals; I basically wanted to ensure that I had a supply of decent teas in this tea-bereft country I had chosen to live in. I also espoused the lofty goal of helping to raise Estonia's tea drinking culture... as it had nowhere to go but up, it couldn't be such a stretch to fulfill this. “Good luck with your little hobby,” I was wished.

While I would now respectfully (tearfully!) caution anyone from running their business as a hobby, there are much worse pastimes than being steeped in the Leaf night and day. And has the coffee-only country become a tea-loving one? It's still no China, but within a European context, incredibly so. The changes I've seen over the years have been truly fascinating. I might one day write a book about them: *The Power of Tea—the Ultimate Baltic Transformer*, or some such tacky title best read out loud in the Trailer Man voice.

Not a week has gone by, already for the last two years, without someone telling me that they no longer drink coffee (or have reduced their dependence on it). They tell me that their bodies, minds and souls respond so much better to tea. They tell me they feel like better human beings from drinking good teas. They tell me of the major and minor transformations that have occurred with tea as the catalyst, of relationships solidified and meditations intensified. And with no loss of warmth or energy; on the contrary.

The Road to Cha Dao

It likely began, as it so often does, with Milky Oolong. That was the first Tea tea I'd tried in the mid 1990s which wasn't store-bought, mass-produced, so-called “tea”. A small, Chinese-run teashop had opened in Montreal; finally, a small tea wave had begun to balance out the seemingly endless tide of coffee shops which had engulfed city blocks across North America for well over a decade.

Tea was a new, daunting, confusing world to me and I stuck with the sweetest thing they had for my first visit. Something I could understand. I thought it was the best thing I'd ever tasted. So do many of my new customers just stepping into the tea world. I don't tell them that I never drink it anymore. I'm happy they like it and make sure to give them a free sample of an unadulterated oolong to compare. If those same shop owners had insisted I buy their best Wuyi Rou Gui, I wouldn't have understood it and might have been scared off tea for a long time.

The road to Cha Dao is often challenging, trippy, meandering, obscure (and lots of fun!), and I suspected it would lead me to enchanted places. Not to a New Jersey shopping mall. That my road from Milky Oolong to the Tea Sage Hut in Taiwan was via New Jersey just shows up Fate's Joker card: the unlikeliest of places and people often lead to the most profound changes.

I was intensely interested in anything to do with Japan at the time and when once in New York, thought it would be fun to visit the much-lauded Mitsuwa Japanese mart in Edgeware, New Jersey. Aside from some decent kabusecha and fried seaweed snacks, a book called *The Way of Tea* caught my eye. I flipped through it and immediately felt like buying it, but decided to be disciplined and not get it. I had a pile of tea-related books which I'd bought (I must! I'm into tea!) but then never read. I was not going to add to my collection just when I wanted to reduce it. Still, this one seemed to approach tea in a way I hadn't seen before. But no, I needed to be strong. I read another page and walked quickly to the register before changing my mind.

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I had spent by then a number of years traveling in North America and Europe, taking courses about tea and meeting many lovely souls who added to my knowledge about tea the plant, tea the business and tea the meditation tool, but the words on this book's pages appealed to a deep sense that I had not yet stepped into the realm where tea really wanted to take me. There was much about my life not in harmony with being a Chajin. I knew that, but didn't know what to do about it.

I thought I had already been transformed by tea pretty significantly by then: it had come knocking at the door, patiently taught lessons over and over again about concentration, discipline, the need to nurture inner calm. Tea as humble teacher offers lessons about humility, about receiving back that what you give, about living life in harmony with what is and not with what the mind would like to see. Yet I sensed that these lessons were not fully learned, wavering between a mind-based understanding of them and attempts to live them.

After absorbing the book, I felt compelled to write the author a note of thanks... and that led to me being picked up at an unlikely train station halfway around the world just a few months later.

The first thing I told my hosts at Tea Sage Hut is that I had arrived with an emptied cup. It was a cup I had long wanted to pour out—sure, much of what had been in it had been beneficial and already ingested. For a true transformation to occur, however, emptying just a few droplets and hoping that a new flavor or two would do the trick would only prolong a set of illusions. I was ready to toss out much of what I'd previously held to be 'true' or important about tea. And learn what tea wanted to teach us, in becoming us.

In the coming issues I plan to interweave some musings inspired by the tea-steeped transformations which Tea Sage Hut triggered in me at just the right time and place...

Our center's 200-year-old, hand-carved Rikyu

