



# HOW DOES AN ESTONIAN TEA SHOP CELEBRATE ITSELF?

*Article by Steve Kokker*

In Estonia there is a tradition called “Summer Days” where companies (pretty much every company in the country, big or small) will shut down operations and take their entire staff on a day or two trip outside the city. It’s meant for bonding and to say thank you, but it’s often an excuse to party hard, often with a barbecue grill, lots of booze and toe-tapping fun games like karaoke, tug of war or bobbing for apples strung with string from workmates’ belts. Anything to coax shy Estonians out of their shells. At their best, they offer a few days respite from the city, a chance to get to know their workmates in ways other than via moments around the coffee machine and in general meetings.

Having been raised in Canada, I always found this tradition quaint, perhaps a tad odd and sometimes forced. Yet enviable at the same time. Certainly a step up from annual Christmas cocktail parties or the occasional Friday eve at the local bar! Why don’t we make more of an effort to promote mutual understanding and fun in North America?

In any case, as a business owner I had managed sneakily to avoid this tradition all these years, as for a while my business was solo and then for many years a project headed by the dynamic duo of me and Triin. Neither of us wanted to go bobbing for apples on each other or hear our renditions of *I Just Called To Say I Love You*, so a lunch here and there counted as Summer Days for us just fine. This year, however, the number of people involved in our Chado teashop and tea importing business is up to about seven... and one day our newest employee Sille asked quite matter-of-factly, “So when is our Summer Days holiday?”. I must admit I at first laughed as I thought she was joking, then saw that her expression never changed as she waited for an answer. I coughed and said decisively, “Well, I’m not sure yet,” and from that grew what eventually became our two-day outing to a little island called Aegna, just off the mainland.

How does a teashop celebrate such events? Us four guys and three gals were definitely anomalies at the camping ground-holiday center where we were staying. Unlike the others, we had no hot dogs, thumping oom-pah-pah music or cases of beer. Instead, we earned the suspicion and strange glances of other guests by spending much of our time inside a small, mosquito-netted tent by candlelight, sipping from tiny cups, mostly in silence and sometimes to the tune of music which certainly only cult members listen to. At other times we could be observed engaged in tickling fests, climbing trees, taking photos of moss, searching each other’s bodies for ticks, hugging or eating food which only a rabbit

could love. We didn’t need our morning chakra-opening yoga exercise routine in the forest to get the others whispering behind our backs.

We all had a chance to serve tea to each other as well. These tea sessions were our main events. All seven of us got to serve each other whatever tea we chose in whatever style. It was an excellent way to share some joy, express oneself, open up to others and step out of comfort zones by practicing that which is too rarely practiced. For most, it was the first time serving so many people and there were a few shaky hands, a few klunky noises and spilled drops of tea, but in the end only radiant smiles, gratitude and good feeling remained. I am more used to serving tea than others there yet still it was challenging to keep performance anxiety at bay and struggle with a temptation to proceed at a pace faster than the heart’s.

I felt deeply touched throughout the weekend by how much we all so obviously enjoy each other’s company and how we are all on a very similar life vibe of trying to become better humans. It is good, open hearts and the spirit of tea which has brought us all together, and what a simple, deep joy it was to share such moments of humanity with other beautiful beings. We all left a little dizzy with happiness, and with more than a little feeling of Wow at having found each other and tea—each other through tea. I had a few near-teary moments of gratitude for having such an incredible collective in my life (I scarcely want to use the word ‘employee’); far from a situation of a top-down boss-worker scenario, we are an assembly of like-minded co-workers who are doing our best to develop our foundations as decent people and spread that in the language of tea to many others. It feels very much as we are doing that and often, even as the daily grind can get relentlessly punishing, I close my eyes in head-shaking, stunned gratitude at the opportunity to do so.

I’ll now let the others share their experiences, for theirs is the voice which reaches out to so many, which has the power to shape and change lives positively...

## *Tea Friends*

*By Triin Juurik*

I guess it does not matter how long someone has been preparing tea alone, it does not prevent the tingling of butterflies dancing in one’s stomach when about to serve tea for many people.

To pour tea for seven friends and workmates on that beautiful summer day on an island far from the city



center was a valuable lesson. Especially when taking into account that the majority of us served tea to so many for the first time only. I had a chance to do an early morning session, and the tea I chose was light and flowery. I guess besides the great pleasure to serve tea, it was also a check-point to see and observe my own growth on this Way of Tea. When you sit down and take some deeper breaths, then it's certainly time to let go: To enjoy the unknown, face the fears, loosen the inhibitions. It's also important not to try to think about the teachings of the books and the advice shared by the teachers, and just observe what has actually stuck with you. Let hands make the moves though the heart and enjoy the moment. Try to notice and listen to the messages and remember them. Although we all saw shaky hands, broken cups and spilled tea, we didn't forget that life should not be taken too seriously and that one of the most important things in life is to have a sense of humor. Giggles and laughs are beautiful things, especially when directed to yourself. And the main thing of course was to celebrate some great friendships and bond through lovely talks!

## ***Letting Go***

*By Siim Loog*

Aegna. What a beautiful time it was. Jumping into the unknown, letting go of everyday reality and enjoying the power of being with loved ones. As we drank tea so many times during our two-day trip, I will talk about two major moments that I experienced; we may even call them visions.

The first powerful, and I might even say life-changing, moment was on the second night when Steve made us five-element tea. The magical setting and beautiful human beings sitting in silence allowed me to go deeper within, allowed me to see more clearly. As I was drinking the first two or three bowls, I felt lighter and calmer; I felt the wind blowing in the tree tops; I felt... myself! Later on, sitting silently, eyes closed, I saw a vision of me, resting on the edge of a cliff, all dark beneath. I was drinking tea and smiling calmly. This darkness, over the edge of a cliff represented my fears and the great unknown, which lies deep within me and which I haven't dared to touch. As I was sitting on the edge, watching what was going on down there, I felt good, I felt that I am reaching somewhere, a new milestone in my life. I have always tried to be the shortcut guy, to find a quicker way, always looking for an option to avoid facing what is bubbling secretly in the hidden Pandora's box, where all my fears lie. (Just do not touch that box!) And I have done a very good job with this attitude, but now walking on this path, it is time to face everything that is hidden in me. Enjoying this vision, I was woken by a calm movement by dear Steve. He wanted water...

The second vision was on the next morning while serving tea, when I faced one of my biggest fears in this life, which we can define as something like this: "doing-something(tea, cooking, serving wine, etc.)-in-front-of-the-people-who-know-the-right-way-to-do-it-phobia"! This has been with me from my childhood. Even in school I didn't want to show other people what I was working on because maybe they would criticise my work or tell me to



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fix it. Oy, the fruits of our ego! So there I was, serving tea, in silence, to Steve, Triin and to all others who know how to make good tea. I was totally out of my comfort zone! But you got to do what you got to do! So I did it. I served tea proudly, with shaking hands but proudly, and during the last bowls I was finally able to let go. I closed my eyes and there I was again on the edge, but this time jumping into the darkness to swim together with my fears... I was ready to climb onto the next level, where there is one fear less, and I've conquered it. Those days with people I love gave me the opportunity to do so, to let go some of the silly stuff in me.

As you can see, this period in my life is about conquering my deeper issues. First, I needed to collect them and now, years later, I have to free them. Why do we constantly do it, this collecting of fear? Just to sit more comfortably in our comfort zones, to watch how life passes? I don't have the answers but I feel that if I want to live this life to the fullest, I need to let go of them. Besides those two moments, I enjoyed countless laughs, many hugs and much love. I hope this event will evolve into a beautiful tradition in which we all can learn and grow...

### *A Humbling Tea Weekend*

*By Timo Einpaul*

As Steve expressed it, the main goal during those three days was that each person would get the opportunity to serve tea to others, and in doing so, share oneself. Although practical issues and wordly matters were discussed, the focus was always on something more fundamental—communion with one another, the tea and the marvelous surroundings. Some sessions were held in silence, some in mostly laughter—whatever the particular occasion called for. I remember serving tea the very first night we got there—an aged *hei cha* in a side-handled pot. We sat on the ground with some candles being the only light source. We waited for the water to boil. Being largely deprived of the sense of sight, one quickly learned to use one's ears to hear when the water started boiling, and when the teapot was filled with water to the top. Some glances and smiles were exchanged but no more was necessary. A natural silence fell upon us. It felt joyous to serve tea for so many people, but above all for these people: my brothers and sisters in tea.

In my everyday life I try to keep the doors of my home open to anyone (the same for my heart), be it convenient or otherwise, but I cannot expect to control which gifts my guests bear—it is up to them if they leave by the door their bills and deadlines, wins and losses, joys and sorrows, or the meaningless quarrel they had with a loved one that morning. All one can do is to sweep and to brew, at least so it would seem to me, creating a supportive atmosphere for all of us to shed off the chatter. I have a tendency to accept far too many gifts, and often lose my balance, lose myself, and my tea practice weakens as well. There is a great rejuvenating power in taking a tea retreat, sharing bowls with fellow tea-lovers on an idyllic island, serving and being served

tea by people who take refuge in the same spiritual practice as you do. Coming back home I could feel the difference when brewing tea. I was much more centered and mindful, much more aware and present with tea and the moment at hand, as well as able to convey these vibrations to my guests.

### *Island insights*

*by Jaanus Leplaan*

It's always a pleasure to find myself in the company of tea loving friends. A weekend spent on a small island with the Chado teashop collective was no exception. In addition to the tea drinking marathon, laughing festival and the stone skipping event—a semi-official national sport of Estonian tea lovers—it also contained some insights and realizations. Here are mine:

#### *Realization #1*

Life truly is too short to spend it doing things you don't love! And I say "love", not "enjoy". While doing things you love is not always easy or enjoyable, things that you might enjoy at the moment (like watching TV or devouring a bucket of ice cream) aren't always the things you really love or want to devote yourself to in the long run.

#### *Realization #2*

Serving tea to fellow tea wayfarers is not as easy as it sounds. Although it may seem like the most natural and enjoyable thing to do, it is not without its challenges. Being present and at the same time remembering all the details takes practice.

#### *Realization #3*

Working alongside people who share similar values makes life so much more enjoyable and interesting! There are so many different ways to learn and develop as a person, but my favorite has to be sharing experiences with friends. I've been with the teashop from the very beginning, working part-time and helping out as much as I could. But it is only recently that I quit my day job as a café manager and became a full time member of the Chado gang. During these few months following my career change I've observed a few interesting changes: I now love my work more and enjoy even the smallest of details. I've met some kind and interesting people and found myself in situations and places that I otherwise wouldn't have had the chance to be a part of or visit. It seems to me that by making a decision to change one aspect of my life has made a noticeable difference in other aspects as well.

It is the people who we share tea with that make life such an interesting journey. I am truly grateful for every day I get the chance to serve tea to people from all over the world who have found their way into our tiny tea shop on the edge of an old town in a city full of coffee drinkers.

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### *Stage Fright*

*By Maarja Koovit*

Chado's weekend trip to Aegna was in many ways meaningful for me. First of all, it was my very first time on the tiny island north of Tallinn (even though I've been living in Tallinn for all my life). Secondly, I had just arrived back in Estonia from my exchange semester in Germany two nights earlier and the Chado family were the first dear people (aside from my biological family) I met in Estonia. Last, but not least, I hadn't actually had proper tea with anyone but myself for five months.

I have been working at Chado for a bit more than three and a half years, which is longer than about half of our team of great people have been in the company. I have mostly been working part-time, since I also need time to study in University, but I definitely have learned a lot more about tea and myself than you would think is possible to learn as a part-time worker. Still, I feel pretty silly and green behind the ears when I compare myself to my co-workers, and I paid extra attention to the others serving tea on Aegna before it was my turn. I felt kind of scared and nervous about my "performance". I watched others pouring the water and steeping tea so gracefully and I honestly felt more like an elephant in a porcelain store...

I prepared some Kagoshima Sencha as a casual midday tea for our group, and bit by bit, as I was cooling the water and filling cups with steeped tea, my worries melted away. It wasn't really a "come what may" state of mind I found myself in, since I was still trying to follow the tea-serving tips I had gotten from others, but I knew it was my family I was serving tea for. It was great to just relax and do my best in order to make them feel good. There was no need to impress anyone, since they had all accepted me as myself long before I served them tea. I know I have a long way to go in terms of making and serving tea in a perfect manner, but it will come to me, step by step. Aegna was the perfect place for finding the peace of mind that will help facilitate that...

### *At Peace*

*By Sille Paas*

I am the newest member of the Chado tea family, so before going to our trip to Aegna I was really nervous. I tried to prepare my tea in many different ways, but still felt insecure and I was afraid of so many things. I hadn't poured for eight people before. I tried to serve my tea with different borrowed cups, gaiwans and pots but in the end still decided to bring my own little gaiwan and cups. So until the very last moment, I didn't feel confident. Ten minutes before my session I ran to the meadow and tried to find some blue flowers to make it look prettier, and when I served my first round of tea my hands shook a lot. The calmness came into me when I tasted my own tea. I was happily surprised because I got the taste I was looking for.

Timo was the first to serve tea to all of us and from that moment something changed and I started to see the process of serving tea differently. I was the last one to serve tea, so I practiced being lucid in the moment and tasting the tea as long as possible. And when I prepared the tea I didn't think about anything. I just enjoyed the taste.

The biggest realization that I brought back with me from that trip was that people are autonomous in their feelings. Its impossible to get the same feeling and describe how I felt in Aegna, but the main idea that I learned was that in these tea moments that I experienced on Aegna I was at peace within myself. And any time I have prepared tea after Aegna, I've tried to pour in peace...



