

خلينا نشرب الشاي!

Do you drink tea? How do you drink it? Should it be green, black, or something else? Should it be very sweet, just slightly sweet, or left unsweetened entirely? Should it be hot or cold? What sort of cup should you drink it in? Who should pour it?

For you, the answers to these questions may not be particularly consequential – to each his own, right? But in many countries in the Arab world, these same questions are more than just matters of individual taste, but are issues of outsize cultural importance. In the Arab world, tea is not just a drink – it’s often a way of life.

To begin, though, let’s back up a bit. Who says there aren’t strong opinions about drinking tea in the English-speaking world, anyway? **Let’s read the following excerpt** from the English writer George Orwell, who you might know from his books *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and consider his thoughts on what makes an ideal cup of tea:

“A NICE CUP OF TEA”

By George Orwell

Published in the Evening Standard,

January 12th, 1946



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If you look up 'tea' in the first cookery book that comes to hand you will probably find that it is unmentioned; or at most you will find a few lines of sketchy instructions which give no ruling on several of the most important points.

This is curious, not only because tea is one of the main stays of civilization in this country, as well as in Eire, Australia and New Zealand, but because the best manner of making it is the subject of violent disputes. When I look through my own recipe for the perfect cup of tea, I find no fewer than eleven outstanding points. On perhaps two of them there would be pretty general agreement, but at least four others are acutely controversial. Here are my own eleven rules, every one of which I regard as golden:

- First of all, one should use Indian or Ceylonese tea. China tea has virtues which are not to be despised nowadays — it is economical, and one can drink it without milk — but there is not much stimulation in it. One does not feel wiser, braver or more optimistic after drinking it. Anyone who has used that comforting phrase 'a nice cup of tea' invariably means Indian tea.
- Secondly, tea should be made in small quantities — that is, in a teapot. Tea out of an urn is always tasteless, while army tea, made in a cauldron, tastes of grease and whitewash. The teapot should be made of china or earthenware. Silver or Britanniaaware teapots produce inferior tea and enamel pots are worse; though curiously enough a pewter teapot (a rarity nowadays) is not so bad.
- Thirdly, the pot should be warmed beforehand. This is better done by placing it on the hob than by the usual method of swilling it out with hot water.
- Fourthly, the tea should be strong. For a pot holding a quart, if you are going to fill it nearly to the brim, six heaped teaspoons would be about right. In a time of rationing, this is not an idea that can be realized on every day of the week, but I maintain that one strong cup of tea is better than twenty weak ones. All true tea lovers not only like their tea strong, but like it a little stronger with each year that passes — a fact which is recognized in the extra ration issued to old-age pensioners.
- Fifthly, the tea should be put straight into the pot. No strainers, muslin bags

or other devices to imprison the tea. In some countries teapots are fitted with little dangling baskets under the spout to catch the stray leaves, which are supposed to be harmful. Actually one can swallow tea-leaves in considerable quantities without ill effect, and if the tea is not loose in the pot it never infuses properly.

- Sixthly, one should take the teapot to the kettle and not the other way about. The water should be actually boiling at the moment of impact, which means that one should keep it on the flame while one pours. Some people add that one should only use water that has been freshly brought to the boil, but I have never noticed that it makes any difference.
- Seventhly, after making the tea, one should stir it, or better, give the pot a good shake, afterwards allowing the leaves to settle.
- Eighthly, one should drink out of a good breakfast cup — that is, the cylindrical type of cup, not the flat, shallow type. The breakfast cup holds more, and with the other kind one's tea is always half cold before one has well started on it.
- Ninthly, one should pour the cream off the milk before using it for tea. Milk that is too creamy always gives tea a sickly taste.
- Tenthly, one should pour tea into the cup first. This is one of the most controversial points of all; indeed in every

family in Britain there are probably two schools of thought on the subject. The milk-first school can bring forward some fairly strong arguments, but I maintain that my own argument is unanswerable. This is that, by putting the tea in first and stirring as one pours, one can exactly regulate the amount of milk whereas one is liable to put in too much milk if one does it the other way round.

- Lastly, tea — unless one is drinking it in the Russian style — should be drunk without sugar. I know very well that I am in a minority here. But still, how can you call yourself a true tealover if you destroy the flavour of your tea by putting sugar in it? It would be equally reasonable to put in pepper or salt. Tea is meant to be bitter, just as beer is meant to be bitter. If you sweeten it, you are no longer tasting the tea, you are merely tasting the sugar; you could make a very similar drink by dissolving sugar in plain hot water.

Some people would answer that they don't like tea in itself, that they only drink it in order to be warmed and stimulated, and they need sugar to take the taste away. To those misguided people I would say: Try drinking tea without sugar for, say, a fortnight and it is very unlikely that you will ever want to ruin your tea by sweetening it again.

These are not the only controversial points to arise in connexion with tea drinking, but they are sufficient to show how subtilized the whole business has become. There is

also the mysterious social etiquette surrounding the teapot (why is it considered vulgar to drink out of your saucer, for instance?) and much might be written about the subsidiary uses of tealeaves, such as telling fortunes, predicting the arrival of visitors, feeding rabbits, healing burns and sweeping the carpet. It is worth paying attention to such details as warming the pot

and using water that is really boiling, so as to make quite sure of wringing out of one's ration the twenty good, strong cups of that two ounces, properly handled, ought to represent.

(taken from The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 3, 1943-45, Penguin ISBN, 0-14-00-3153-7)

Before moving on, **take a moment to discuss:**

- Orwell makes reference to ways of making tea as "the subject of violent disputes." What exactly does he mean here? What he imply about the role of tea in British culture of his era?
- What different "variables" do Orwell mention in describing how to make his ideal cup of tea? List as many as you can and the different options that are available to the tea-marker.
- In passing, Orwell indicates a number of "wrong" ways to make tea (at least in his mind). What are they?
- Who do you think the audience of this piece is?

TEA IN MOROCCO: 'IT'S IN THE BLOOD'

By Jeff Koehler

Published in The Washington Post,
October 21st, 2014



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A few winters ago in Rabat, while working on a book about Moroccan food, I went to spend the morning cooking with the family of a friend. There had been a mix-up over the address, and we were getting a late start on four elaborate, long-cooking dishes that would be our lunch. But instead of heading straight into the kitchen and getting to work on the leg of lamb, handful of kid goat shoulders and pair of plump chickens awaiting us, I was ushered into the formal sitting room for mint tea.

My host brewed the tea without hurry, eventually pouring it back and forth between the pot and a glass as the flavors blended and bloomed and the liquid turned golden amber. Once she tasted the perfect balance of strength, sweetness and mintiness, she held the silver teapot high and poured it out into small, ornately patterned glasses rimmed in gold.

Only after a leisurely second cup and too many almond-filled cookies and intricate pastries, steeped in honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds, did we move from the divans and plump silken cushions and into the kitchen.

I've experienced dozens such scenes in the 15 years I have been traveling in Mo-

rocco, but this is the one I remembered recently in Tangier: I was sitting in Cafe de Paris with a friend on a drizzly morning over — what else? — thé vert à la menthe (atay bil naânaâ in Moroccan Arabic). The importance of offering guests tea is so fundamental to Moroccan hospitality, I remarked, that it had come to be the very symbol of it for me.

"Not offering tea is a sign — a sign of..."

my companion said, unable to find a strong enough sentiment in English. "You must," he finally blurted out. "It is in the blood. It's in the culture."

Tea's position as the country's most beloved beverage has never been challenged. "Tea is drunk at the slightest pretext every hour of the day," wrote Madame Guinaudeau in her classic 1950s work on Moroccan cuisine. It starts a day and ends it, precedes a meal and finishes it, and for some dishes gets served with it, too.

In Rabat, when we finally ate the kid that had been slow-cooked with copious amounts of ground coriander seeds, cummin and garlic, my host insisted that sweet mint tea not only paired perfectly with the bold flavors of the goat but also helped to

digest the large meal. A month later, celebrating New Year's Eve with my wife and daughters in Chefchaouen, the famous blue city in the Rif Mountains, we tore off pieces of spit-roasted lamb with our hands, dipped them in bowls of ground cumin and, at the urging of the cook who argued in identical logic, ate it with scalding-hot mint tea.

Tea was probably introduced into Morocco during the reign of Moulay Ismail (1672-1727), perhaps as a tribute from Queen Anne of England for releasing a group of English prisoners, but it didn't become popular until the mid-19th century. The closure of Baltic ports during the Crimean War (1853-1856) left British merchants with an excess of tea from China, and in their efforts to find new markets they offloaded some in Tangier and Essaouira.

Although still a luxury in the 1840s, it then filtered rapidly down through the classes and across the country and had become a staple by the early 1880s, when tea and sugar combined to account for about one-quarter of Morocco's total imports.

The tea itself is loose-leaf Chinese gunpowder green, with its tight, granular roll. To that Moroccans add sugar (until recently, in chunks broken from conical loafs), skip the milk and stuff generous handfuls of fresh herbs into the teapot. Mint is key. The area around Meknes, the imperial capital during Moulay Ismail's reign, produces the country's most vibrant mint — technically spearmint, *Mentha spicata* — with narrow, brilliant green leaves. But it is not always the only herb in the pot. In winter, it's typical to include pale, silvery absinthe

leaves (wormwood), marjoram, sage and verbena as well.

Slight differences in the tea glass are found from region to region. Fes is known for a golden, aromatic version, lighter toned and more subtle, while Berbers in the High Atlas mountains prepare a bolder brew with plenty of wild herbs. In the deep south, the tea is stronger and darker and served in smaller glasses. Tradition once required drinking three glasses, and there is a saying about this that sometimes gets attributed to the desert region:

*The first glass is as bitter as life,
The second is as strong as love,
The third is as soothing as death.*

The tea that wet morning in Tangier had a blend of herbs, including sprigs of absinthe, with their hint of warmth and bitterness. Fragrant, brilliant white bitter-orange blossoms floated on the surface. The tea was perfect: minty enough to tingle in my mouth, sweet enough to make me a touch thirsty.

Although ingredients used in preparing tea tend to be added with a generous hand, they are not simply dumped into the teapot and steeped. The preparation of mint tea in Morocco involves ritual. Patient and measured, sometimes ceremonious, always artful, it becomes stylized as the tea is poured, from high above, into small colorful and patterned glasses. It's theatrical and, as the tea doesn't spill all over the table, always impressive.

But the high pour is more than just a party trick. The scientific-minded argue

that boiling the water “flattens” it and this re-aerates it. Some say it is done to cool the scalding tea, still others say it is for the small bubbles that form and cling around the inside curve of the glass. “They give the tea a bit of texture,” explained my companion in Cafe de Paris.

And then there is that soothing, cascading sound that adds another layer of senses to the experience. After hundreds of glasses, I have learned to see that gentle sound as a way of saying, “Attention! Your tea is ready!” And: “Pay attention to your host!”

Just as with the preparation, tea is drunk equally without hurry. “It’s not — ” said my Tangier friend, pausing to mime gulping down an espresso, “but sipped, drunk slowly.” There is, no matter what needs to be done, always time for friends — and for tea. For him, the two remain intricately linked.

Many of my strongest memories in Morocco include glasses of tea, a key experience of traveling there. It’s a way that Moroccans make visitors feel welcome. It wooed me when I first went and has drawn me back over and over.

This past spring, after spending a year and a half writing a book about Darjeeling and its celebrated tea growing on the steep Himalayan slopes, I headed to Tangier for a break from my desk and from thinking about India and, perhaps most of all, for a change in tea.

Darjeeling tea, with subtle, fragrant aromas and flavors — delicate, even flowery,

hinting of apricots and peaches, muscatel grapes and toasty nuts — is served without milk, sugar or, because of its slight natural astringency, even lemon. Many of the world’s finest teas — silver needles from China, fine Taiwanese oolongs, sweet green teas from Japan — are treated in similar fashion: steeped and appreciated for their nuanced and unadorned flavors.

My last tea in Tangier before returning home was taken alone. I was staying in a small house at the end of a twisty lane in the Kasbah. Narrow as a subway, five stories tall, with a garret at the top that acted as lounge and office, it offered views out over the medina and on down to the old port and the wide, sweeping golden beach beyond it. Into the pot I stuffed mint (crushing it slightly against the bottom with a spoon), absinthe leaves and some orange blossoms as rain splattered the windows and softened the geometric shapes of the roof patterns of the medina sprawling below.

With Darjeeling, I had learned that the tea itself — its final flavor — was the most important.

And that, it seems, is another key purpose of the elaborate ritual of preparing Moroccan tea: to achieve the perfect, final cup.

As the tea cascaded into the glass from the pot, the sound said, “Pay attention!” But, in the quiet house, it meant to the tea itself.

Now that you've read the article, **let's discuss:**

- According to the author, what role does tea play in hospitality in Morocco? What comments are evidence of this?
- How, specifically, is Moroccan tea made and drunk? Locate the portion of the text where the author names specific details.
- How does the Moroccan "ideal tea" compare to Orwell's in the previous article? What elements would Orwell agree with? Which might he dislike?
- What sort of "rituals" are performed when tea is consumed? What sort of reasons do people give for them?
- How does the author relate the different places where he consumes Moroccan tea? How is each of these "scenes" different from the others?
- This article focuses on Morocco. If the author had gone to a different Arabic-speaking country, what parts of the article do you think might have been different? What parts would be the same?