

### **The growing and preparation of Japanese tea. Alan Macfarlane**

The first stage was the growing of the tea. Extreme pains were taken to keep this medicinal plant as pure as possible. 'The finer sort of tea requires special care in the cultivation. The plantations are situated remote from the habitations of man, and as much as may be from all other crops, lest the delicate flavour of the tea should suffer from smoke, impurity, or emanations of any kind. The plants are manured with dried anchovies and a liquor pressed from mustard-seed.'<sup>1</sup>

The next stage was the curing of the tea. Kaempfer noted that whatever virtues the tea leaf contained would be affected by the way in which it was prepared. 'The leaves must be roasted when fresh, for if they were kept but one night, they would turn black, and lose much of their virtue: For this reason they are brought to these roasting houses the very same day they are gather'd.'<sup>2</sup> Siebold noted that 'The process of harvesting the tea, or rather, of storing the harvest, is one of extreme nicety. The leaves are sorted for the finer and coarser teas as they are plucked, and no more of either kind are gathered in a day than can be dried before night.'<sup>3</sup> The tea was 'prepared in the Tsuiusi, as they call them, that is, publick roasting-houses, or laboratories, built for this very purpose, and contrived so, that every body may bring their leaves to be roasted.'<sup>4</sup> The tea could also be roasted at home. 'The Country people go a much shorter way to work, simply and without any great art, roasting their leaves in earthen kettles. Nor is their Tea much the worse for it, which besides, as it costs them no great trouble nor expense, they can afford to sell very cheap.'<sup>5</sup> The larger leaves 'are not rool'd up, and curl'd, as the better sort of Tea is, but simply roasted in a pan, and continually stirr'd, whilst they are roasting, lest they should get a burnt taste.'<sup>6</sup>

An alternative method, which also aimed to preserve as much as possible of the natural juices, while cooking the leaves, is described by Chamberlain. 'As soon as possible after being picked, the leaves are placed in a round wooden tray with a brass wire bottom over boiling water. This process of steaming,

<sup>1</sup>Siebold, *Manners*, 232

<sup>2</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 3, 230

<sup>3</sup>Siebold, *Manners*, 232

<sup>4</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 3, 230

<sup>5</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 3, 233

<sup>6</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 2, 329

which is complete in half a minute, brings the natural oil to the surface. The next and principal operation is the firing, which is done in a wooden frame with tough Japanese paper stretched across it, charcoal well-covered with ash being the fuel employed.<sup>7</sup> Another account describes how "The hoiro, apparatus for drawing tea, is of oblong rectangular form. The outside case is of wood; the interior is roughly lined. Charcoal of hard and soft wood is light; on this is burned some straw, the ashes of which temper the too direct action of the fire."<sup>8</sup> The aim was to cure the tea, but to do so as lightly as possible, and hence not to destroy the natural oils. 'Sometimes - and we believe this to have been the common practice in ancient days - the leaf is not fired at all, but only sun-dried.'<sup>9</sup>

Once the tea had been cured, it was essential to store it carefully. 'The Country people keep it, and indeed their Tea in general, in straw baskets made like barrels, which they put under the roofs of their houses, near the hole which lets out the smoak, they being of opinion, that nothing is better than smoak to preserve the virtues of the leaves, and still to fix them more and more.'<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there was the matter of the making of the tea. This, of course, also varied very considerably. The art of making the fine green teas used in the tea ceremony became so highly refined that it became the centre of Japanese etiquette and social life. The making of fine, thick or green tea is briefly described thus: 'After the ordinary tea, we were supplied with a beverage peculiar to the upper classes of Japan: this consists of a sort of **puree** made of the tea-leaves themselves. They are first stewed, then dried and ground in a hand-mill into a powder; this is mixed with hot water, and whipped with split bamboo until it creams. It is served up hot, and looks like phisic. Altogether, I thought it more palatable than senna. This delicacy is called Koitscha, or thick tea.'<sup>11</sup> Kaempfer noted that the coarser the tea, the hotter the water. For instance, 'There is still a third way of making the Tea by a perfect boiling, which goes farther than a simple infusion, and is used by the vulgar and Country people, who drink of it all day long.'<sup>12</sup> The method of making this tea is described by Inouye. 'The tea drunk at meals is common tea, which as it consists of old leaves, may be taken in any quantity without affecting the nerves. A handful of the leaves

<sup>7</sup>Chamberlain, *Things*, 454 - is this green tea? XXX

<sup>8</sup>Regamey, *Art and Industry*, 206

<sup>9</sup>Chamberlain, *Things*, 454

<sup>10</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 3, 238

<sup>11</sup>Elgin, *Mission*, 153

<sup>12</sup>Kaempfer, *History*, 3, 238

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is thrown into an earthen tea-pot and hot water poured into it; and the pot is set over a fire to keep it hot. The infusion is of a reddish-yellow hue and is almost tasteless.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Inouye, Home, 62