



# More tea in Sri Lanka

The second in a series of features on a tea tour to the home of tea, Liz MacKenzie guides us through a busy tea auction and a biodynamic estate visit ....

In the Spring Issue of **tea**, we began a fascinating tea tour organised by Robert Wilson's Ceylon teas. The journey affords people on the tour glimpses into the world of tea only usually seen by those in the tea trade. We discover the reality of the working conditions for those people carrying out all the tasks that mean we can enjoy our daily brew.

First to the tea auction, which is recognised as the largest tea auction centre in the world and takes place in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The very first



tea auction took place in Colombo in 1883 and nowadays around 200 companies vie for sales. The auction accounts for the sale of about 95% of tea from Sri Lanka and happens on a weekly basis. (source: Sri Lanka Tea Board)

In a room reminiscent of a lecture theatre, with the auctioneer beneath tiered seating, the auction is already underway. This is a predominantly male domain, with just one woman present on the day of our visit. We were instructed to be very quiet and, in fact, we hardly

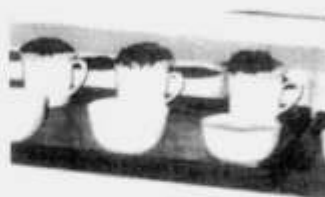
dared breathe for fear of purchasing substantially more tea than we might be able to take home.

A board lists the estates selling on the day, each estate name being slid into the requisite slot on the board. As with any auction, to the untrained eye and ear it is all fairly incomprehensible, though nonetheless fascinating. The quick-fire 'lots' were all spoken in English, though it may as well have been in Singhalese for all the we could comprehend. When the gavel struck, however, it was clear the lot was sold.



Tea samples

The teas sold are sent out to the brokers several weeks in advance of the auctions in small, metal tins and they can then bid for teas to suit the blends they wish to create. Each bidder thus knows exactly what he is going to bid for and in the printed auction sheets all prices are noted. This was a quick visit yet we all left with a clearer notion of the process of auctioning teas and the buzz from such an event.



Our next stop was John Keells Tea Broker, who make 2000 sales each week and take around 25% of the market at the auction. They sell

teas grown in the low areas and assess them by examining dry leaf, infused leaf and the liquor - followed, of course, by tasting the teas using the time-honoured method with small tasting cups and spoons. After tasting, the liquor is spat out into a brass spittoon, in the manner you would use at a wine tasting. The tasters sample a massive 500 teas each week and, if satisfactory, will then send them to the auction. Each sample is then

retained for 4 weeks in case it is contested.

Having all donned our tasting aprons, we set about sampling some teas - though nowhere near the number the experts try. Our samples ranged from silver tips to green teas to different gradings of black tea. For some of the people on the tour it was a great surprise to be offered green teas as they had not realised that these were produced in Sri Lanka along with those more commonly recognised by us.

We were then honoured to be invited to the Board Room for tea. Here we discussed various aspects of the tea trade; fair trade and what it means in reality for tea planters, minimum wages, problems of labour shortage especially in the high areas, concerns about the future possible need for machine plucking and the problems this would cause regarding the quality of teas. We did all this over a very fine pot of tea as you might expect. Certainly, for me, this discussion was most interesting and stimulating - discovering aspects of the tea trade I had not yet encountered.

## Iddalgashinne Bio Dynamic Organic Tea Estate

Our first chance to see a tea estate in action came at the Iddalgashinne Estate, a somewhat unusual and captivating visit. The estate is owned by Staasen but run as a co-operative by the local community who make the day to day decisions. The bio-dynamic approach is somewhat complex to the uninitiated, relating to the moon, astrological and other charts that are sent annually to the estate to guide the production of the tea. The guide who showed us around inspired us with his enthusiasm and his complete commitment to this way of working.

Less difficult to understand are the individual parts that make up the system as a whole. The bio-dynamic approach is based on a complete recycling and composting system on a huge scale. Anyone who manages their

own garden system for creating and turning compost, having a wormery and producing natural fertiliser liquids may well be familiar with how this all works in practice. Undoubtedly less familiar is the concept of filling 1960 cows horns with manure and burying them 1.5 feet deep in a piece of land 12 foot by 6 foot, leaving them for a year and then digging them up and distributing the manure in small amounts around the estate. Though I did not fully understand this concept, I was nonetheless impressed by the high level of organisation such as the notices attached to stakes saying when compost had last been turned and when it was next due for turning.

The important question is, did the end result - the tea - taste good? After the guided tour of the estate, we were taken to a pleasingly cool room where tea was served. We had the chance to relax and mull over what we had learnt - the opportunity to sit and 'talk tea' had already become an important aspect of the tour. The tea was superb - fresh, light and with the beautiful golden colour associated with the best of Ceylon teas. In Sri Lanka hospitality is very important and not only did we receive this delightful tea but biscuits and fresh fruit all served by workers on the estate.

We were fortunate enough on this visit to be shown around the pre-school where we were greeted by smiling children in a well run nursery. We hear much in this country of poor facilities for workers in the tea industry yet none of this was evident here. The workers are paid according to minimum wage rules, housing is provided as well as maternity leave, medical facilities and nursery school for the younger children. This was important learning and certainly challenged the beliefs that many of us on the tour arrived with. It is all too easy to assume from a distance and accept all we hear through the media and other bodies.

## Talking tea with the drivers

During the tea tour, we were driven around in cars or small minibuses and this gave the opportunity to ask our drivers their thoughts on tea and the places we were visiting. After the visit to the bio-dynamic estate, I talked to the driver about what he thought of the tea itself. This is what he told me:

"This was a very good tea but I would never be able to afford to buy it myself - it is too expensive. On average a family of five would drink about 1kg of tea each week. In Columbo many people buy their tea from the local shops who sell it from large open sacks. This is cheap but not very good quality tea and the flavour is lost very quickly because the sacks are open."

He went on to tell me that, as a driver of this and other tours, he chooses to buy his tea directly from the tea factories they visit. This is much better quality tea, also coming packaged to seal in the flavour.

It was very interesting to hear the perspective of an 'ordinary' Sri Lankan, though somewhat sad to hear that the fine teas that we, perhaps, take for granted are too costly for the average Sri Lankan to enjoy. This was one of many things I learnt that put into real terms that which we can only wonder about from the security of our relatively comfortable and settled existences in a country like Britain.

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**Coming up** in the next Issue of **tea** - we continue this fascinating tea journey, visiting the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka and discovering some great places for enjoying the wonderful brew that is Sri Lanka.