

Innovating the great Indian beverage

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Ambarish Ghosh, Founder and Director, The Hillcart Tales shares his views on Indian beverage industry



India's obsession with tea is no secret. There is a tea for every occasion or season. The country's vast and diverse geography provides further impetus to the fascination for this elixir. The most intriguing feature about the tea plant is that its taste and aroma is highly influenced by climatic conditions. Factors like humidity, altitude, temperature, moisture in the air, etc., create variances in teas from one region to another. That is why Nilgiri tea, for instance, would never be identical to the one in Darjeeling or Assam.

Although a long accepted staple, tea is today undergoing a transformation -- from the hot beverage consumed by one's bedside in the early morning hours to a lifestyle drink presented in astounding variety. Innovation and experiments with tea are the order of the day. Recent innovations such as cold brew tea and dessert tea, have given a whole new meaning to this age-old beverage.

Tea as cold brew

One of the latest trends in the Asia-Pacific region is cold brew tea. Tea leaves are left submerged in cold water for several hours which allows them to release their full flavour in the water. It is a very niche practice at the moment and is considered quite exclusive. Another interesting aspect of cold-brew tea is that it doesn't turn bitter and dark. While tea as a cold brew accounts for just 1% of the total global tea releases,^[1] its popularity is on the rise.

Dessert tea

Experimenting with tea is not a recent phenomenon and tea connoisseurs have tried the fusion of tea with fruits, herbs, nuts, and floral flavours. Now, it is being merged with flavours of desserts. This kind of tea is primarily a sweet blend that is created to resemble the taste of any particular dessert. The sweet and innovative concoction appeals even to those people who are not fond of the typical hot tea. Dessert tea is becoming an upscale trend in India, and one that is expected to proliferate in the years to come.

The rise of tea

Until recent years, tea in India was widely perceived as a mass drink whereas coffee was considered as the drink of more selective connoisseurs. The growth of coffee chains all over India also encouraged this perception. However, today, tea is steadily establishing itself as an innovative and experiential beverage. Ready-to-drink tea-based beverages in a variety of flavours are finding their way to market shelves. Specialty tea chains are now directly competing with the established Baristas. The emergence of tea products such as White Tea, Oolong Tea, Dessert Tea, and Cold-Brew tea has successfully positioned this beverage as the new favourite among the discerning customers. Apparently, the ubiquitous cold coffee is no longer the unique experience of the season. Another major factor that works in favour of tea also happens to be the one that had made coffee gain a lead over the former earlier: the mass appeal.

In conclusion

Traditionally, tea has been the drink that energized Indian masses; it is now displaying its full potential. Innovation is being witnessed in the tea sector at all levels. Whether it is cultivation, brewing, blending or serving, the beverage is available in various forms and flavours. By breaking into the high-end, flavoured and experiential beverage segment, the legacy of tea is embracing new avatars as it becomes appealing to today's consumers!