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## **‘A Nice Cup of Tea’, Sixty Years On**

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If I had to pick just one essay of George Orwell’s, I would choose his ‘A Nice Cup of Tea’, published in *The Evening Standard* sixty years ago today, on January 12, 1946.<sup>1</sup> When push comes to shove, Orwell is at his best when he is with the basics. What I like about Orwell’s essay is the way that the nuance of the phrase, ‘a nice cup of tea’, with its homely, working class resonance, determines the framework of the whole discussion. At one level, this is an article about how to make tea. But the phrase ‘a nice cup of tea’ determines precisely what kind of tea making Orwell is talking about—a nice cuppa, no droning on here about the respective attractions of ‘first’ or ‘second flush’. Which is not to say that I’m personally unadventurous in the realms of tea. The window of my old office in Oxford, a picture of which with a small blue teapot in the foreground you can find in an obscure corner of my website, was the site of an afternoon ritual in which at tea-time (that is, 4 p.m.) my body-clock would tell me that it was time for a break and a cup of tea. Putting on the kettle which would boil away perilously on the floor, I would choose between an array of teas before me piled in small square tins against the base of the window: the front runners were generally Earl Grey, Lapsang Souchong, and Moroccan Mint (my favourite overall, and taken in a glass), with special mention for the Maté tea which I always used to enjoy in the knowledge that it was Che Guevara’s favourite drink (the Guevara family business was a Maté tea plantation). I have yet to succumb to the astringent charms of White tea (in the green cylindrical tin there) or even Green tea, though I have tried it in various combinations designed to disguise its taste. Conversely, the packet of sweet Turkish Apple tea which you might spot lower right, given to me in lieu of change by a stall seller in the bazaar in Istanbul, remained resolutely unopened. These rather outré choices for tea in the afternoon at work were conditioned largely by the fact that I would have no milk there—at home, at the same time, I would always simply plump for ‘a nice cup of tea’.

Orwell remarks that no recipe book ever tells you how to make a cup of tea, surprising in view of its popularity, but that is of course why it is completely unnecessary. I just checked, on his behalf, in my copy of Delia Smith, who can normally be relied on to tell you how to make the things that other recipe books feel are too normal or too common to be worth spending time on, but even Delia says nothing on the subject. Apparently

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<sup>1</sup> <http://robertjcyoung.com/orwell.pdf>

unknown to Orwell, Mrs Beaton, on the other hand, is characteristically thorough on the matter of beverages, and devotes serious attention to the making of both coffee and tea (her full recipes for both, and much more, can be found on [www.mrsbeeton.com](http://www.mrsbeeton.com) ). Contrary to Orwell's fastidiousness, she is, however, comparatively casual about its preparation. She writes cheerfully:

There is very little art in making good tea; if the water is boiling, and there is no sparing of the fragrant leaf, the beverage will almost invariably be good. The old-fashioned plan of allowing a teaspoonful to each person, and one over, is still practised. Warm the teapot with boiling water; let it remain for two or three minutes for the vessel to become thoroughly hot, then pour it away. Put in the tea, pour in from 1/2 to 3/4 pint of boiling water, close the lid, and let it stand for the tea to draw from 5 to 10 minutes; then fill up the pot with water. The tea will be quite spoiled unless made with water that is actually 'boiling', as the leaves will not open, and the flavour not be extracted from them; the beverage will consequently be colourless and tasteless,—in fact, nothing but tepid water....

*Time.*—2 minutes to warm the teapot, 5 to 10 minutes to draw the strength from the tea.

*Sufficient.*—Allow 1 teaspoonful to each person, and one over.

The tea being made, we are then treated to a learned disquisition of equal length on the tea plant from the point of view of its botanical classification and variations. The substance of Mrs Beaton's advice could be boiled down, one might say, to the following: warm the pot, use boiling water, and allow 1 teaspoon per person, with one for the pot. Simple, classic. Orwell would not disagree with any of these precepts. What makes his essay different, however, is that he does not separate the mechanics of efficient tea making from the vast array of its complex social significations. Orwell's essay remains, therefore, the indispensable classic on the subject. Having said that, it cannot be allowed to rest without some minor but significant challenges as well as updatings.

Orwell's recipe contains 11 outstanding points, out of which only two, he writes, would command general agreement, but every one of which for him is golden. He omits, characteristically, to tell us which he considers the two universals from his eleven.

1       The tea must be Indian or Ceylon. Here the resonance of 'that comforting phrase' 'a nice cup of tea' is at its strongest, and certainly anyone would be dismally disappointed by being served a cup of China (or, far worse, herbal!) tea after hearing it. China tea is perhaps more soothing than stimulating. Times seem to have changed though since Orwell's time. Ceylon teas are now rather weak for a nice cup of tea. So Indian it must be, or, I would add, African. Barry's famous Irish tea is entirely Kenyan, and makes a very nice cup.

2 Tea out of a pot rather than an urn. Certainly. The last time I had tea out of a silver pot was ten years ago in All Soul's College in Oxford. There were two pots, one marked Indian and the other Earl Grey, laid out on a tray on immaculate white napkins. It was all too intimidating to notice how the tea tasted, but even if I could remember, by definition it could hardly have been 'a nice cup of tea'.

3 Warming the pot beforehand. Agreed. We no longer have hobs to warm the pot as thoroughly as in Orwell's day, but conversely English houses are probably much warmer in the first place, and so the pot will be too.

4 The tea should be strong. Once again, complete agreement. Though how strong is 'strong' will be a subject of discussion in 11, below. Orwell claims the older you get, the stronger you like it, which is why pensioners were given an extra tea ration. An extravagant fantasy on his part—the danger of hypothermia is likely to have been closer to the real reason.

5 The tea should be put straight in the pot, loose. Now here we get to a tricky issue. Orwell was writing in the days before tea bags. Nowadays, 'a nice cup of tea' will almost certainly be made with a tea bag, probably PG Tips. I think the arguments about tea bags are now finally over, except for a few die-hards. Other kinds of tea may need to be loose, but 'a nice cup of tea' these days comes via the bag. Orwell misses the chance here to discuss what to do with the tea leaves, which can only really be disposed of properly by being thrown in some fashion. He must not have been much of a gardener. The traditional English practice is to put the mashings on the rose-beds, which spurs the roses on to caffeine-induced blooms of glory. Tea bags, by contrast, it must be admitted, are always unpleasant to dispose of. They lurk in the pot, like an octopus hiding in the daylight, and emerge only reluctantly, soggy, wet and cold, dripping across the floor as you put them in the bin.

6 Boiling water on the tea. This is a rule that I would regard as being particularly golden, and unforgivable when broken. The experience of ordering tea in a foreign country and being brought a cup with warm water in it, with a tea-bag sitting in a paper envelope on the saucer beside it, is unendurably depressing, and enough to spur one to catch the first plane home. Does it have to be freshly boiled water? Some people swear to this ('must be freshly drawn'), but like Orwell, I find it impossible to taste the difference.

7 The stir. Essential with tea leaves, and even with tea bags. There is, in addition, something inexplicably pleasurable about this cursory stir.

8 The tea cup. Nowadays most tea is probably drunk from a mug, which Orwell would have approved of. He doesn't mention the question of whether tea tastes better from a china cup, but a nice cup of tea is rarely a porcelain experience. Can you actually make a nice cup of tea in a tea-cup, as people are often wont to do nowadays, dispensing with the pot altogether? Here, as Orwell would say, I am probably in the minority, but I never find it as good, maybe because it has little space to breathe in down there. And it then requires the milk to go in afterwards (see below), before the tea bag, undrained, is

hauled dripping from the cup and thrown straight into the bin which it often misses, leaving dribbles of brown stains down the front. Increasingly, though, tea bags are being made for the cup, not the pot. I dread to think what Orwell himself would have thought of this practice. He would have been pleased, though, to know that many a nice cup of tea still gets made every day.

9 Pour the cream off the milk first. My grandmother used to like cream in her tea, but I have never encountered such an inexplicable preference in anyone else. When milk came in bottles, and the cream sat on the top, creaminess was always a danger. Nowadays with our 1 or 2%, we have nothing to fear. Notice that Orwell doesn't even stop to debate the question of whether there should be milk in the tea at all. And quite right too.

10 Milk in first or last. Orwell argues for milk in last, and this, he agrees, is by far the most controversial rule. His 'scientific' argument, however, which he regards as unanswerable, that putting the milk in afterwards allows one to regulate exactly the right amount of milk, by passes completely the class dimensions of this issue of which, as an old Etonian, he would certainly have been well aware. 'Milk in first' is, or was, a characteristically oblique English way of suggesting someone's class status ('oh, she's very much milk-in-first, my dear'). Since 'a nice cup of tea' is indubitably working class in resonance, putting milk in last is entirely incompatible with its social, dare I say, socialist milieu. Moreover, even on scientific grounds, putting the milk in first allows the tea to heat the milk, and stir it at the same time. You then simply keep pouring the tea until you get the right strength. It requires more skill, certainly, but this is the essence of such familiar practices. The upper classes probably had to put the milk in afterwards because they were so unused to pouring it for themselves.

11 No sugar. Here again we descend to class differences. A nice cup of tea without a spoon of sugar is a contradiction in terms. Moreover, if the tea is made strong enough, as Orwell himself suggests, it will need a little sugar to temper not its bitterness but the astringent tannins that will emerge. A case in point here is a drink that Orwell must have been very familiar with—Indian *chai*. Incomparably delicious—but imagine drinking it without sugar! And certainly, the sugar leaves plenty of taste. Does *chai* qualify as 'a nice cup of tea'? Today I would say certainly, yes. 'A cup of char' is already familiar working class slang for a nice cuppa. Of course, *chai* itself has its own rules. It must be boiled remorselessly with the tea, cardamoms, buffalo milk and sugar (or condensed milk) already mixed in, before being poured in foaming twists from dizzying heights from one tiny pot to the other by the *chai* walla to give it its dense, frothy taste. It must be drunk sitting on stools at a stall by the roadside. Recently, globalised coffee shops have started offering 'Chai'. But this milky mess has absolutely nothing to do with the sublime original.

12 There is one point on which Orwell is curiously silent. How long should the tea be left to mash, or brew? A prematurely-poured cup is a complete domestic disaster, likely to cause intense dissatisfaction and impatience from all around. This of course is never something that anyone actually times, but a certain interval is essential. Mrs Beaton says five to ten minutes: five minutes is what people would generally say, but they would

probably never leave it so long. The whole thing is a matter of finesse and judgement. How very different from the simple act of spooning the coffee into the espresso machine, which goes by the name of the more desirable and discerning gourmet experience in our own tea-challenged times.

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