

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES – FOOD!

TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

Tea for Jew, and Jews for Teas

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



In my last column, I rhapsodized about Israeli coffee and, after filing said story, even started a shopping list for son Avi's upcoming travels to Israel.

But let's not forget tea, after water the most popular drink in the world. When we think of tea, supermarket staples like Lipton, Salada (with their message tags), Tetley, or Red Rose likely come to mind. At a higher level, there's Twinning's, Bigelow, and Harney & Sons. (That last one actually did a Zoominar for our community at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown.)

Then there's that Passover favorite, Wissotsky, straight to our Seder tables from Israel. Now, Wissotsky is not just the leading tea distributor in Israel. Founded in 1849 in Moscow, making it one of the oldest tea companies in the world, this family-owned company grew to become the largest tea firm in the Russian Empire. By the early 20th century, it was the largest tea manufacturer in the world.

I'm sure that I'm not the only person of Ashkenazi ancestry who can remember a relative, sugar cube held in his/her teeth, sipping tea from a glass. And at least one of our readers has probably inherited a brass samovar that speaks volumes about our collective history in the Pale, and the gallons of tea consumed.

So, what actually is tea?

Traditional tea comes from the *camellia sinensis* plant, an evergreen shrub native to southwestern China and northern Myanmar. It includes a variety of types, including black, white, green, yellow, oolong, and yerba mate, and is prepared by pouring hot or boiling water over the dried or fresh tea leaves.

Historical documents record tea drinking as early as the third century in China, where its popularity grew. The custom spread throughout East Asia and ultimately arrived in Europe in the 1500s. A hundred years later, the English adopted it and instituted the cultural rites known as "afternoon tea" (the one with those tiny sandwiches, cakes, and scones) and "high tea" (the evening meal, with meat, fish, and egg dishes, as well as dessert). Those of us who enjoy British television know that characters will refer to any meal as "tea."

The British loved their tea so much that they started tea plantations in India to add that commodity to the spices and other exotic items they imported to Europe. They established the East India Company in 1600 to function as an arm of the Crown. But, as we well know



Wissotsky tea packaging from the Russian Empire. From Wikipedia: "During the Russian Revolution, an anti-Semitic ditty mentioning Wissotsky tea made the rounds of Russian society, spreading the idea that Russia was the victim of Jewish domination: "Tea of Wissotsky, Sugar of Brodsky, and Russia of Trotsky." The Wissotsky family relocated the company out of the Soviet Union in 1920.

company. Harvesting wild herbs he found in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, he grew his business to become a \$100 million company.

When I went to Israel as a kibbutz volunteer in my late teens, heavily sweetened mint tea was the only choice that I knew. Merchants in the Old City *shuk* would offer potential customers the beverage to soften them up. And back at the kibbutz, I learned fairly quickly that inviting a naïve young girl for tea — also suffused with fresh mint leaves and lots of sugar — was just another term for "Come up and see my etchings."

But just as coffee has evolved in Israel (and I hope the pick-up lines have, as well) so has tea. And grocery chains like SuperSol or Rami Levy's aren't the only places to purchase it.

Mahane Yehuda is no longer the simple, somewhat primitive, fly-infested open-air market selling whole fish, olives, and cheap plastic utensils. It has morphed into Quincy Market on steroids, with over 250 vendors selling an amazing array of items from halvah to cheese (although a lot of food products are still left open and uncovered). And when the sun sets, it becomes the hottest nightspot in the city. Bars and restaurants, each and every one blaring ear-splitting music, line the alleyways of the market.

Stopping at one of many spice dealers, we bought a large bag of za'atar, that wonderful Middle Eastern herb mixture composed of hyssop, sumac, sesame seeds, and other spices. There's nothing like sprinkling fresh za'atar over hummus, labneh, or baba ghanouj, or rubbing it into chicken for a savory delight.

But the spice vendors are now also selling herbal tea. And not your Celestial Seasonings variety. One of the most popular items in the market now is a new



Klonimus Wolf Wissotsky, who founded the tea company carrying his name in 1849, was called "the Russian king of tea." He was also a prominent figure in the proto-Zionist Hovevei Zion movement and was part of the leadership of the Bilu movement, founded in 1882.

concoction containing various herbal ingredients. While some were savory, such as one made of turmeric, the majority on offer were composed of dried citrus rind and tiny cubes of dried fruits. So, after sampling the wares (because how can you say "no"?) we bought an enormous bag of honey-tinged cubed dried ginger, citrus peel, and dried cranberries. It is delicious. What makes this tea unique is that after drinking the steeped mixture you can eat the fruit (I can't really call this stuff the dregs) with a spoon.



So, now I have another item to add to my shopping list.



DIY Herbal Tea a la Mahane Yehuda

Until I can get back to Israel, here is my attempt at imitating the tea we have enjoyed.

INGREDIENTS:

- ½ lb. crystallized ginger
- ¼ lb. dried cranberries
- ¼ lb. dried orange peel

DIRECTIONS:

- Cut the ginger into 1/8-inch cubes.
- Mix with the other ingredients.
- Put a tablespoon of the mixture into a large mug.
- Pour boiling water over the mixture and let steep for at least five minutes.
- Drink it up, and when you get to the bottom, spoon up the fruit.

Carol Goodman Kaufman has just published the second picture book in what is planned as a series about nature for young children. Written under the name Carolinda Goodman, *Pirate Ships and Shooting Stars* is written in rhyme, and its lively stanzas encourage young children to use their imaginations when looking up at the sky. From rainbows to constellations to pictures in the clouds, Kaufman believes there is much to see if only they lift their eyes.

In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the Berkshire Jewish Voice), and her first novel, a murder mystery, will drop in 2023.