



An Introduction to Indian Tea

Where does your tea come from?

Across India, we have tea growing areas, some older than a century, and some very new. Each region produces tea that's influenced by the soil, climate, tea varietal, and market demands.

Some of the places where tea is grown in India are:

In the north, tea is grown in the hills of Kangra, in Himachal Pradesh. Moving eastward, tea is grown in the states of Uttarakhand and also in Bihar which enjoys the advantage of proximity to both Darjeeling and Assam. The eastern part of India is where tea reigns as an important crop. Darjeeling in West Bengal is famous for its GI-tagged, orthodox black tea, most of which is exported. The lower elevation region of Dooars and Terai are important for CTC tea production. Further east, Assam is the largest single tea producing region in the world and produces its famed black teas, as both orthodox and CTC teas. Tea is also cultivated in Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura. Moving south, tea is grown in the slopes of the Western Ghats, along the Nilgiris, Wayanad, Munnar, Anamallais, Travancore and the Chikmagalur-Sakleshpur-Coorg belt.

AT A GLANCE

- < 500,000 hectares under tea cultivation
- <200,000 small tea farmers
- <1,500 large tea estates
- <1,300 million kilos produced every year
- <11 lakh people employed in tea cultivation

How is your tea made?

About 80% of the tea we make is consumed in India. Most of the tea we drink is black tea, produced in the CTC or Crush Tear Curl style. To make it, tea leaves are processed by large CTC machines to create even sized granules. The tea is then sorted in grades of CTC Broken Leaf grades, CTC Fanning, and CTC Dust. CTC teas are known to impart strength to the cup.

Leaf tea or orthodox tea is produced in machines different from the CTC machine. This style of processing retains the integrity of the leaf and is thought to impart flavour to the cup.

Besides these two styles, there are other ways of speciality production, often done in small volumes, by some tea producers.

In addition to black tea, we also make green tea, white tea, chai, oolong... These are all made from leaves that come from the same plant. Where they differ is in the tea varietal that is best suited to make a certain type of tea, along with the processing styles needed for each.

Who makes your tea?

Tea is cultivated by small tea growers (STG) and by large estates. Small growers are defined as those who cultivate up to 25 acres of land. Compare this with large tea estates that cultivate tea on a few thousand acres.

Most small growers do not have a processing facility on their farm. They either sell to the nearest large estate or to a Bought Leaf Factory (BLF). The green leaf is processed in a factory. And the processing method is decided by the the kind of tea that is to be made.

On a small tea farm, most of the work is often done by the farmer and his family, with the help of local workers as needed. On a large estate, workers are employed and they also reside there. In addition to a daily wage, they are given a house, access to a creche, primary school and medical facilities. When tea plantations were set up, they were isolated areas and the workers lived here, with most family members contributing to the estate's work. Jobs were often inherited. This system continues even today although it is changing due to growing awareness and changing aspirations in the workers.

How does your tea reach you?

Once tea is processed, whether in the bought leaf factory or large estate, it is sold, via auctions or directly to buyers. Depending on who the buyer is, the tea may pass through a wholesaler, or a retailer, or a blender, before it takes its final form in a packet ready for the end consumer. Tea that is sold in the market is often a blend of many teas, which means that the retailer chooses various CTC grades to create a single blend. The choice of the teas in the blend is often determined by taste, flavour and price.

Do you trust your tea?

Your tea travels long distances before it reaches you. Knowing where it's grown, how it's made and who makes it, will help you understand how safe your tea is.