



Steeped in the Moment

I thought I knew tea. Then I met Josephie. / BY CARA STRICKLAND

I START EVERY MORNING with a cup of British black tea, a remnant of several months my family lived in the United Kingdom when I was young.

My mother acquired a tea habit, and by the time I was 8, I knew how to make a proper pot. I started the electric kettle, and when it boiled, I poured a small amount of hot water into the teapot and swirled it slowly before emptying it into the sink—hotting the pot, it's called. Next, I would add in the tea bags: PG Tips from the U.K., as ubiquitous there as Lipton but with a distinctly British flavor. The formula, my mother said, was one for each person and one for the pot, so I always added four, for her, my brother, and me. Then, I allowed the tea to steep until five minutes had passed and I could pour a cup

for her the way she liked it, with just a splash of milk. I would place it at her bedside, and only then would she begin to stir.

At 16, my first job was in a tearoom, discerning the palates of guests in hats and floral dresses, helping them choose from our selection of more than 50 teas and tisanes. I moved so quickly that I would barely touch the ground as I made tiny pots for a group of five people, trying to keep all the flavors straight in my head. After they were gone, I did the dishes while sipping dregs from a chipped teacup.

It was no surprise, then, that I would make my way to Gaiwan Tea House in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, along with 30 others, to meet Josephie Dean Jackson, a newcomer to Idaho by way of

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Australia and Texas (which made for a fabulous accent). She was teaching a wildly ambitious two-hour course on the history, preparation, and culture of tea. I was eager to meet Josephie because I'd heard that she was beginning to grow tea in Idaho, the first attempt in the state. She'd planted seedlings from Russia and Nepal, and they'd already survived nearly two winters since her arrival in 2015.

In 2009 Josephie began to grow a test plot of tea plants in East Texas, becoming the first female tea farmer in the United States and the first tea farmer in all of Texas, ignoring those who told her it wasn't possible to grow tea there, since no one ever had. "There always has to be a first," Josephie told the crowd. "Just because no one had done it, didn't mean it couldn't be done." A few minutes later she added an additional word of advice. "Don't tell a woman she can't do something."

In her early days, there were only a handful of American tea farms, but

Each batch changes, releasing moisture and transforming, ready to take on moisture in exchange for flavor again.

more have begun to pop up around the country. She harvests *Camellia sinensis* leaves, using them to make a variety of teas, including black, green, white, and oolong; they retail between \$600 and \$800 a pound.

Early in the presentation, Josephie showed pictures of her Texas tea and its bright green leaves, about 10 times larger than what I shook into my little pot every day. How could it be that I'd given so little

thought to what tea might be like in its natural state? I had only experienced it when it was ready to use, completely dry and curled.

While Josephie talked, we sipped tiny cups of several teas with particular historical significance. "You have to use all of your senses when drinking tea," she said. "The sixth sense is your soul. You might find that, when you really smell the tea, it will bring back memories." She was right, of course. When I stopped and paid attention, I could suddenly be in a small tea shop in Seattle, sipping too-hot lavender black tea too quickly, or sitting on the floor in my college boyfriend's apartment, trying strong, fermented *Pu'er* for the first time.

Several weeks later, I met Josephie for tea at Gaiwan. Once settled at our table, she removed two sets of carefully wrapped Chinese teacups and taller, cylindrical scent cups from her purse, and placed them on small wooden trays. Next, she pulled out a *gaiwan*, a Chinese tea infusion bowl invented during the Ming dynasty.

She filled the *gaiwan* with tea leaves and waited just a moment for the tea to steep before pouring some into my scent cup. She demonstrated the proper technique, placing the cup on top of the scent cup tightly, flipping it, and slowly releasing the scent cup. The teacups cooled slightly, and we buried our noses in the empty scent cups. "What does it smell like to you?" Josephie asked.

"Honestly, it's a little like barley," I said.

"There are no right answers," she said. "It's all about how it smells to you, what it makes you think about."

As the tea dried in the scent cup, the smell changed, almost jarringly. My barley scent became a strong honey aroma.

Only after we'd thoroughly noticed the scent could we begin to sip the tea.



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Josephie told me that in Chinese culture, it's polite to hide your teeth as you drink, and that you should finish the cup in three sips.

She poured out the excess tea from the gaiwan into a stoneware pitcher from her purse and refilled it with water for a second steeping. "It's even better the second time around," she said.

As we sipped, we talked about resilience. "The tea leaf has been abused," she said. "Its water has been taken from it. When it comes back to life, it's called the dance of agony." She paused to take a sip. "But when you taste it, it's all worth it."

Beauty out of hardship and suffering is a metaphor close to Josephie's heart. As a divorcee, immigrant, and single mother, Josephie made a living in the male-dominated oil and gas field. When her daughter rose above bullying, she reminded Josephie of her own potential. Later, newly married and blending a family, she decided it was time to grow into that potential. She planted her first tea crop.

Even when everything is going well, it takes four to seven years before you see a harvest from a tea plant. Josephie's first plants suffered through drought and insect ravages. Still, they carry on.

She removed a small bag of traditional Chinese black tea—she called it Texas Cha Cha—from her purse. As she steeped it, she reminded me that this was the tea James Norwood Pratt, a noted tea authority, once called the best U.S.-grown tea he'd ever consumed.

We had been drinking good tea at Gaiwan, but something about this experience was different. I had never tasted tea in the presence of the person who grew and processed it. I didn't know if it was really that much better, or if my brain had tricked my taste buds, but it was delicate and slightly floral. "It tastes a little like a Darjeeling, doesn't it?" Josephie asked. It did.

The next day, Josephie flew to Texas to check on her tea. When she returned, a week later, she sent me a text: "Have a little tea leaf plucked from TX and shall be guiding the core members of tea class how to make tea tomorrow. Let me know if you would like to come."

I texted back immediately, asking for the address.

NOTHING PREPARES ME for the glossy green leaves that Josephie pours out of Ziploc bags onto the kitchen counter. Our small group of tea enthusiasts is made up of the faithful members of Josephie's weekly classes at Gaiwan, and none of us can wait to touch tea leaves in their natural state.

We begin to sort them into piles by size; Josephie regales us with stories of traveling through airport security with eight plastic bags of damp tea leaves.

A day of tea-making can last 14-16 hours. There are so many leaves to sort; I despair that we will ever make the tea at all. "When you drink tea from here on in, you'll think about the people who did this," Josephie says.

But after a while, a meditative calm descends over the room. The members of the tea class are no longer second-guessing their sorting technique. We have entered into the experience fully.

Somehow, that pile does get sorted, and then it's time to decide what kind of tea each pile will make. The smallest leaves with the most buds will be white tea, Josephie says. Two others will make two different kinds of green tea; there will be an oolong and a black.

She spreads the future white tea on a cookie sheet and pops it into a low oven to wither. One student puts larger leaves into a skillet on very low heat, gently rotating them with his hands. Another steams leaves in a silver bowl.

When Josephie pronounces the leaves withered, it's time to roll them. One student is meticulous, rolling each leaf by itself. Others

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“Its water has been taken from it,” Josephie said. “When it comes back to life, it’s called the dance of agony.”

roll many under their palms. When more tea is withered, Josephie places it into a muslin cloth, stained with years of tea. She tightens it and rolls it on the counter until juice oozes from the cloth. When she opens it, there is a giant green ball. “This is called a dragon’s egg,” she says.

The white tea is the first to look like something we might steep. It’s lightly green in color, and the moisture is gone. The green tea turns dark and fragrant, curling into leafy tendrils. Each batch changes before our eyes, releasing moisture and transforming, ready to take on moisture in exchange for flavor again. It’s almost 1 a.m. by the time we set every tea on the counter. It’s close, but still needs time to dry. The transformation is dramatic. We can’t stop picking up the tiny leaves and smelling them, commenting on what has changed

throughout the night.

Next week, Josephie promises, we will meet again and cup it.

AFTER TEA AT GAIWAN, just before we parted, Josephie asked: “What do you think your tea metaphor will be?”

Tonight I’ve been letting the question swirl around in my mind, as the tea turned from raw, vivid green into something beloved the world over. They say a woman is like a tea bag, revealed for who she is once she gets into hot water. But long before steeping, weather and human intervention help decide what the tea will taste like.

It’s difficult now for me to look at tea without seeing a metaphor for life. Each joyful day in the sun, each bitter sorrow, every experience I’ve had has contributed to the flavor I carry with me. Like the little teapot from the song, I’m waiting for someone to get close enough to tip me over and pour me out, just enough to share. I have a feeling the results will be delicious.

Cara Strickland is a former food critic and lives in Spokane, Washington. Share your own stories of transformation with her at cara.strickland@gmail.com.



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