

LIFE&TIMES LIVING

Make time for tea

After attending a class in tea blending with 'tea evangelist' Mark Nicholls, Aneeta Sundararaj has a better appreciation of the beverage



FAMILIARISATION PROGRAMME FROM TIMBER COUNCIL

THE Malaysian Timber Council (MTC) recently organised a four-day familiarisation programme for local university lecturers to enable a greater understanding of local forestry and the timber industry through on-site learning opportunities with various companies.

The lecturers, specialising in the fields of forestry, interior and furniture design and architecture from institutions of higher learning, visited seven wood working factories in the Klang Valley and Mentakab, Pahang to obtain insights into the current industrial practices.

Lecturers from architecture and design, forestry, wood technology faculties from tertiary institutions are welcomed to join MTC's Familiarisation Programme. For details, go to council@mtc.com.my.

PEOPLE should learn to make an informed decision about tea consumption, said Mark Nicholls, 39, at a recent Master Class in tea blending.

Introduced as a tea evangelist, the father of one sees a similarity between the British and Malaysians: The British have tea and scones, we have *teh tarik* and *kuah muih*.

He approaches the entire process — from plucking the tea leaves to drinking the brew — with respect and discipline. When people take time out to make tea and enjoy drinking it, he says, they'll see that they've spent a good 20 minutes on what he describes as a zen-like experience. "That's your 'me' time. Your personal space," he adds.

Suggesting that drinking tea is an activity that also promotes family time, Nicholls says that brewing tea was a tradition that passed from mother to child. "My grandmother used to have a large iron teapot. She'd dip her hand in a jar of tea leaves, take what she wanted

and toss the leaves into the teapot," he says.

WHEREIT'S GROWN

Traditionally, tea is grown in the regions between the Tropics Of Cancer and Capricorn. Teas grown further away from the Equator are seasonal and bring delicacy to any blend of tea. Those which grow closer to the Equator are produced all year round and add strength to a blend of tea.

Teas from China are mainly from the *Camei-ia Sinensis* variety, while teas from India have the scientific name, *Camellia Assamica*.

Having travelled extensively all over the world as a Twinings ambassador, Nicholls says there

are subtle differences in teas from each region. For instance, in Munnar, Kerala, there is often a taste of pepper coming through in the tea because of the pepper plantations in the area. He adds: "Then, there are elements of micro-climate.

For example, in Sri Lanka's Uva Valley, the winds that blow can remove a lot of the moisture from the tea leaves."

It is in the Uva Valley that Nicholls seems to have had one of his more memorable experiences.

"I was left alone to work with the local people. I enjoyed watching them," he says,

pointing to a photograph. "See this woman? She was completely passionate about plucking tea leaves. She was very particular about the way she picked, how her hand was

"Tasting tea means allowing the flavours to take a journey through the mouth".

Mark Nicholls



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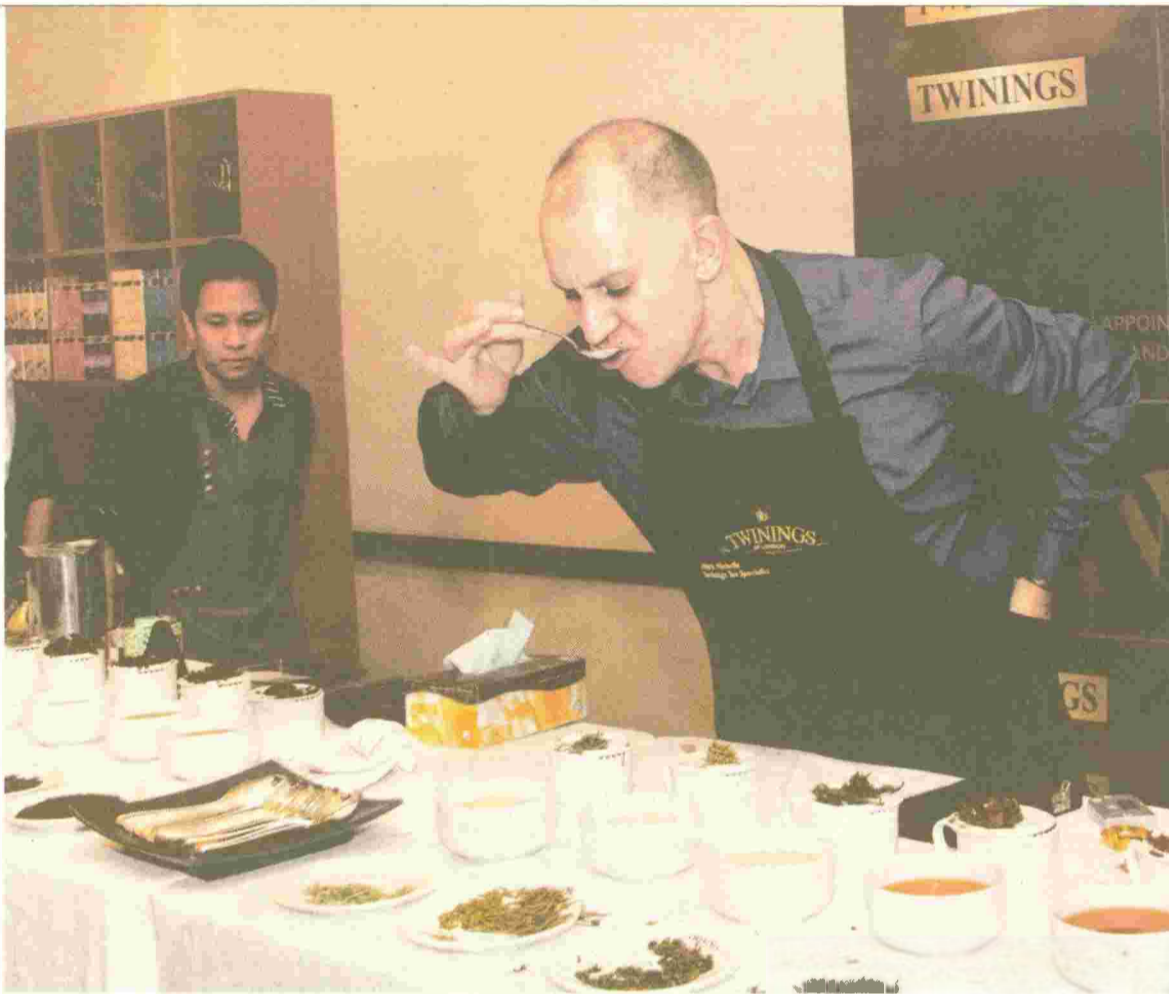
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Slurp the tea and ensure it shoots up to the olfactory gland.

TEA, TWININGS AND THE QUEEN'S JUBILEE



IN ancient China, the story goes that an emperor, Shen Nung, was about to have a drink when some tea leaves fell into his pot of water. When he drank the liquid, he found that it had reviving qualities.

But Mark Nicholls says people were probably chewing tea leaves for their medicinal effects long before Shen Nung. In fact, he believes that people might have known about tea from as early as 7,000 years ago.

The East India Company (15th-16th Century) played a role with its trade in tea. In 1662, when Catherine of Braganza married King Charles II of England, she brought with her a few ounces of tea. In this way, tea was made fashionable in the English Royal Court and upper echelons of society and was widely consumed. By 1706, Thomas Twining recognised the opportunity for growth and gave

up his trade as a weaver of lace to open the first Twinings store in the Strand, London.

A few hundred years later, when Earl Grey was prime minister of Britain, Twinings was asked to replicate a blend of tea he'd received as a gift from a Chinese mandarin who was grateful to the earl for saving a life. Twinings named the resulting blend, Earl Grey.

In 1837, Queen Victoria granted the first Royal Warrant which meant that Twinings supplied teas to the royal household. The tradition has continued to this day. Indeed, Twinings created a special blend of tea to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee. The blend was made mainly from Chinese and Indian tea leaves. Tongue-in-cheek, Nicholls says that some of his colleagues in this region have given the blend a local name: Chindian tea.

angled and which leaf to pick. I learnt so much from her."

HAND-PICKED LEAVES

The first two leaves plucked are called "the first flush". Nicholls explains: "They're younger and tastier and contain the most nutrients. We typically choose the top two leaves from any bush and we get only hand-harvested tea leaves. If you use a harvester, you're never sure what you'll get. And the tea leaves might be traumatised."

On a good day, tea pickers can pick up to 15kg. In any sample, a tea blender is going to look for less than 20 per cent stalks, twigs or stick.

In addition, what finally goes into a tea bag is tested at least seven times — blenders and buyers from Twinings will taste the tea when they are offered the tea leaves, just before shipment, when the tea has landed, as they are hand blended, as they are factory blended and before they are packed. "We're

almost fanatical about it," claims Nicholls.

HOW IT'S DONE

A former Boy Scout who used to make cups of tea for charity, he is horrified when he sees people dunking a tea bag once or twice into boiling water and then throwing it away. Equally shocking for him is when people re-use tea bags.

The correct way to appreciate tea begins with the type of crockery used and the ratio of tea to water. The optimal ratio is 2.5g of tea leaves in 250ml water.

For young silver-tipped white tea, use water heated to 75°C. For mid-range, water is heated to 83°C and for oolong, it's 85°C.

Tea is best drunk when it's 55°-65°C.

The perfect time-frame for tea to brew is three minutes. In the first minute, the tannin is released (which is why some people throw the first brew away). In the second minute, the flavours are released and,

in the third, the anti-oxidants. Any longer than three minutes and the tea can be bitter.

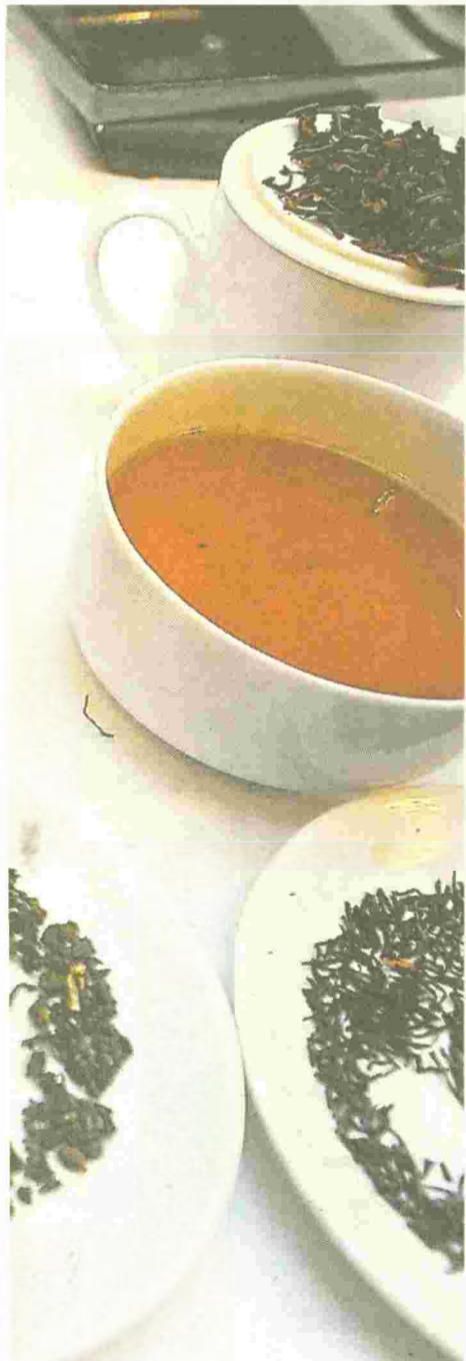
GET THE TASTE

Next, Nicholls gives a lesson in the art of tasting tea. First, observe the tea leaves. Are they a nice colour? Is there any dust mixed with the leaves? When you boil the leaves, is the resulting brew clear or murky? Don't just smell and taste the tea when it's brewed. Instead, you need to develop something called "retro olfactory perception" because, as Nicholls says: "Tasting tea means allowing the flavours to take a journey through the mouth".

To understand how this works, forget your manners about not

slurping liquid from a spoon. Fill your lungs to up to 80 per cent capacity and expel any air in your lungs. Take some tea with a spoon and mix it with lots of air to form a gaseous foam. Then, as Nicholls demonstrates, slurp the tea in a manner that ensures the tea "shoots up to the olfactory gland." In all, what Nicholls suggests you do is to engage with the tea, not just gulp it down.

When the master class is over, Nicholls is blunt: "Tea is becoming a discerning beverage. People are no longer fooled by cheap black tea. All well and good talking and discussing tea. Now go and actually taste some!"



Nicholls plucking tea leaves at the Uva Valley, Sri Lanka.

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