

With hindsight, I see now that things looked shaky from the outset. Moving from the U.K. where ‘a decent cuppa’ is a fundamental human right, to a country inordinately proud of a chain serving coffee that tastes, in the words of some Canadians, like laundry runoff, should have been indication enough of a radically different national palette. But in my single-minded obsession with shipping manifests and visa arrangements, I never gave tea a thought, unless it was to make another pot.

One mouthful of the Red Rose tea at the hotel where we stayed when we arrived in Canada was almost enough to make me jump back on the plane. Prepared at the end of a hard day’s house-hunting, it was meant to soothe fatigue but instead left me with a bad taste and a desperate hankering for home. Some people can see the future in their tealeaves; I began to dread it before I’d even drained the cup. Ever noticed how it’s the small things that can undo you in a foreign land?

Like wine, tea differs in taste depending on the soil and environment it’s grown in. There are almost as many different types as stars in the sky, but my longtime favorite is Assam. A cup of Earl Grey might be perfect for an afternoon pick-me-up and Ceylon is pleasant enough but, for my daily fix, nothing beats Assam with its rich, malty flavor and robust color, and it was the one variety missing from the grocery store shelves. Twinings Earl Grey, Lady Grey and English Breakfast were all mine for the taking, but Assam was nowhere to be seen. How could this be?

Giving Canada the benefit of the doubt and clinging to the belief that, in a land of immigrants, most foreign foibles would be catered to in some form, I settled into my new life and into my supply of tea shipped from home. Tea fanatic that I am, I made a mental note not to accept any offers of tea at friend’s houses – to avoid any barely-touched cups of embarrassment (most people drank coffee anyway). Months passed and a well-intentioned, tea-loving expat friend, also in Canada, heard of my anguish and visited the tea boutiques of Toronto, gifting me a 3.2oz tin of



there's no 'T' IN CANADA

ONE WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR THE CLASSIC 'CUPPA'

contributed by **AISHA ASHRAF**

The first few days in another country – when you weave through layers of disorienting strangeness – remain in the memory with the permanence of a tombstone epitaph. Events become embroidered in the re-telling, much as lichen prettifies the stone, but the message beneath is unchanged. My first cup of tea in Canada was one such memorable experience – for all the wrong reasons.

loose-leaf Banaspaty Assam. I put the kettle on immediately; I needed something to help me grapple with the ridiculous sum of 16 Canadian dollars that the leaves had cost him. The price back home wouldn't have been more than three British pounds, the equivalent of approximately \$4.68 Canadian. At the rate I drink tea, it just wasn't economically viable.

In the supermarket, I scanned the wall of unfamiliar packaging on the tea/coffee aisle. The Red Rose trauma still loomed large in my mind and I'd avoided this area, happy to lose myself in my now dwindling reserves. I was anxious to find anything that replicated the

standard blended tea brands back home. The relief when I spotted Tetley, Yorkshire Tea and PG Tips made my legs go wobbly. Exultant, I seized a box of Tetley but, once home, disappointment struck again; it tasted nothing like its U.K. counterpart. I felt as though someone had promised to

share their chocolate with me, told me to close my eyes, and popped a pickled onion in my mouth instead!

Eyeballing the packet darkly, I zeroed in on the words 'Orange Pekoe', a mysterious term I hadn't come across before, that appeared on most of the boxed black tea. I cursed this 'Orange Pekoe' and Canada's affection for it, railing at such Canadian obtuseness that sought to thoughtlessly foist this foul brew on all. But some post-rant online research soon undermined my one-woman smear campaign, revealing 'orange pekoe' as a reference to the grading of tealeaf wholeness and size rather than variety. Mollified, and more than a little sheepish, I felt conflicting waves of optimism, 'So orange pekoe isn't the culprit', and despair, 'What hope then of finding an alternative?'. I hastily arranged for Assam to feature heavily in the next care package from home.

Two years have passed and my cupboard still holds more tea than Boston Harbor in 1773, bringing a stability to my outlook that nothing else had afforded while my supply line was in question. And, with that delightful penchant for irony that Life seems to have, it was only then, when my needs for the foreseeable future were more than adequately met, that quite by accident I came across a large box of loose-leaf Barooti Assam in an Afghan grocery store. While it doesn't compare to the Twinings, it's indeed a comfort to have a back-up supply available on this continent. ■