

WHY AMERICA NEEDS A TEA RENAISSANCE

BY SANDY M. BUSHBERG

As is our wont, Americans have managed to force our hurried lifestyles onto our tea practices rather than trying to fit a healthy tea practice into our lives. The full benefits of this practice have been lost on the American public and it is the responsibility of those of us in the tea industry to educate people about how to fully re-engage with all of the healing aspects of tea.

Being a highly developed nation comes at a high price. Americans have become hurried, overworked, over-stimulated and overstressed people. We no longer know how to extricate ourselves from the complexities of modern living, and anxiety has seeped into every facet of our lives. We are constantly connected to our cell phones, pagers, Blackberries, fax machines, and computers—so much so that it's difficult to imagine what our lives were like before these ubiquitous electronic intrusions were insinuated into them.

The more ensconced within this lifestyle we become, the more difficult it is to disengage. Our physiology begins to adapt to this barrage of stimulation and even begins to crave it. I have witnessed first hand more and more adults on vacation who sit on the beach attached to a computer and a cell phone earpiece, while the children gather together to link up their hand held gaming units. When I was a child I spent most of my free time outside playing with friends, enjoying nature or using my mind to entertain myself. These days, one is hard pressed to find a child who isn't running home to get on his computer, gaming console or to watch television. To suggest a walk in the woods, a conversation by a stream or stargazing at night would be unthinkable.

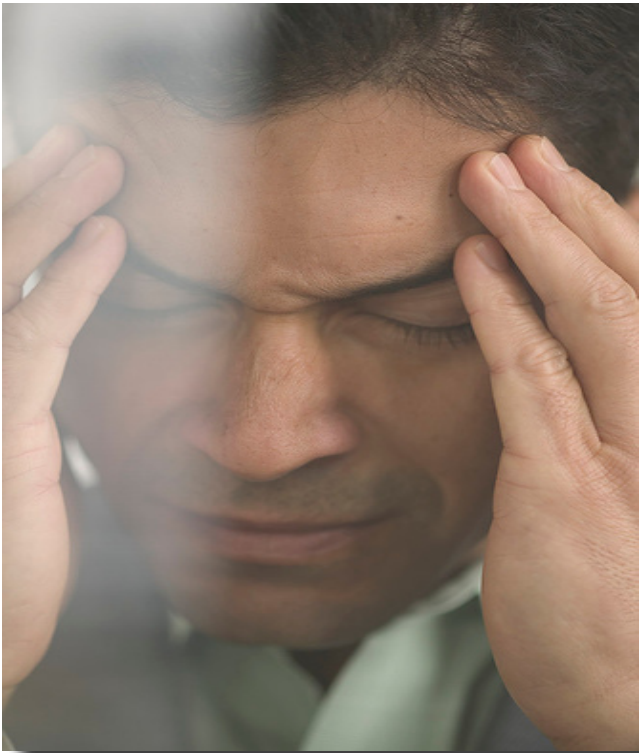
Another negative result of living in a high-pressure society is the impact it has on food choices.



The more hours we work, the more we look for convenient food choices. This translates into fast foods and beverages laden with high fructose corn syrup and other empty high caloric ingredients. These foods are a double-edged sword, providing us with enough immediate energy to meet the demands of an energy-depleting lifestyle, while further potentiating the over-stimulation. It becomes a vicious cycle that can lead to serious health problems like adrenal insufficiency, obesity and type II diabetes. Is this the legacy we want to leave our children? Do we even have a choice at this point?

Though not a complete solution, The Way of Tea can act as a life preserver in this chaotic sea. For the vast majority of people in this country who are not familiar with tea culture, the idea of a tea practice may

The Way of Tea can act as a life preserver in this chaotic sea.



conjure up images of elaborate garb, intricate rituals and paraphernalia. Although that exists, it is not what I am proposing here. What I am suggesting is that we take the time to discover tea and the many simple ways that it can be brought into our lives to help improve our health physically, emotionally and, if one is open to it, perhaps even spiritually. On some levels tea is a very basic beverage, just dried leaves steeped in hot water. But, at the same time, it can begin to help hurried Americans detach, even if just briefly, from their electronic umbilici.

We Americans need to find ways to prioritize quality of life while balancing it with our desire to maintain economic progress. Being one of the most technologically advanced nations clearly doesn't translate into better quality of life. In fact, our life expectancy is ranked #45. Along with the advances of modern technology comes a distancing from the elements of life that help us to feel more connected to and grounded in the natural world. As a result, many Americans

feel a void in their lives where there once was a strong sense of belonging. We need to find the balance between productivity and livability that so many other developed countries, such as France or Japan, have seemed better at creating for themselves.

People say that America is already in a tea renaissance. We are purchasing and drinking tea in record amounts, primarily because of the scores of reports that tea can improve our health in significant ways. However, the tea we are consuming is largely bottled tea that, while providing us with the convenience we so desire, is very often filled with high fructose corn syrup and other additives, which have proven to be leading causes of our growing epidemics of obesity and Type II diabetes. Drinking cold, bottled, sweetened tea while simultaneously engaging in countless other activities eliminates not only the physical health benefits, but also the benefits to be derived by taking the time to be in the present while preparing, sharing, and consuming a cup of fresh, whole leaf tea. As our hurried lives dictate our eating habits, we demonstrate our uncanny knack for turning healthy substances into unhealthy ones. Tea has become just another quick fix, rather than the deep, enriching experience that awaits anyone who takes the time to fully enjoy and share it with others.

In Asia, tea is a gift to be shared. It is shared in such a fashion that the person providing tea for guests takes the time to be sure the tea is prepared in a way that honors the people with whom it is shared. To do otherwise would be thoughtless and inconsiderate. This care and sense of community is contrasted by Americans who drink bottled or teabag tea, individually and in haste. There is little evidence that either the preparer or the consumer have put any thought into it. The effects of balancing and connecting with others—offered by a healthy tea practice—is completely lost. I would like to suggest some ways that Americans, and others as well, can use tea to create simple but powerful rituals to enhance their lives:



1. First, let's take the typical office "coffee" break time. Buck the crowd and make yours a tea break. This is a perfect time to revitalize yourself by taking the time to do your tea practice, with a small pot and cup you keep at your desk (teaware has the added benefit of providing something visually pleasing to look at throughout the day). Find a quiet place to take out your tea and engage with it. Look at its color, texture and shape. Smell its aroma. Put the appropriate amount in your pot or cup, add your hot water as close to the appropriate temperature as you can get it and let it steep. When ready, take your time to pour your tea slowly and deliberately into your cup, observing the flow of the water and the color of the liquor in the cup. Open the top of the pot and inhale the aroma. Now sit

back and concentrate on drinking your tea consciously in the moment. This can all be done in as little as fifteen minutes. This brief and simple tea practice during your workday can be restful and restorative, like a short meditation, while also improving your alertness and making you more productive through the remainder of your work day.

A second option for your office break is to make it a more social engagement. Invite some of your officemates to the break room and share this simple tea practice with them. It is a wonderful way to connect with your co-workers and bring an element of caring and cooperation into the workplace.



Bring the whole family together to participate in a quiet and relaxed tea party.

2. Families can use a tea practice as a way to help them all make relaxed transitions from work and school back to family life. Parents work long hard hours during the day and often struggle with the immediate demands of home life that greet them upon their arrival. Many parents battle with each other about how they will get the downtime they need from work before having to reengage with the demands of the family. A simple family ritual can make this an enjoyable transition. Bring the whole family together to participate in a quiet and relaxed tea party. Involve the children and allow them to take the leaves in their hands to look at and feel. Take the opportunity to educate them about the tea: where it comes from, how it is grown and processed and its history. Let them put the tea in the pot and—depending on their age—you can also let them pour the tea for everyone. This can be treated as a regular family ritual that everyone can look forward to each evening as a way to reconnect after a hard day.



3. Finally, creating an evening tea ritual is a great way to reconnect with your partner (for those couples with children, try bringing a tea practice into your lives after the kids have all gone to bed). You can alternate days as to who selects, prepares and serves the tea. Taking your time to select a tea you know that your loved one would enjoy, choosing a beautiful pot and cup to serve it with and carefully preparing the environment you will be sharing are all wonderful ways to express your love and appreciation for your partner.

As a culture, there is a great deal we can learn from the more traditional, healthful tea practices of other countries. We stand to gain a great deal by taking a little more time to incorporate just a few simple tea rituals into our lives to the benefit of ourselves and our families.



On some levels tea is a very basic beverage, just dried leaves steeped in hot water. But, at the same time, it can begin to help hurried Americans detach, even if just briefly, from their electronic umbilici.