

Ode to Tea

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The morning sun peeks through the kitchen window, generating a metallic sheen on the spout of the charcoal-colored pot. I allow water to stream from the faucet until it reaches the pot's familiar brown ring, about two-thirds full. My mother has yet to return from her night shift, and my father makes his presence known through sporadic snores a floor above. I gently open the cupboard to retrieve two cardamom black tea bags. Though initially floating like Monet's water lilies, they absorb the water and slowly descend to the bottom of the pot.

Bubbles begin to form as I execute each step of tea making just as my folks have done countless times before. I trim off the skin of a cube of ginger, just barely grazing the edge so as not to waste any precious root. *Plop!* In goes the ginger, as well as two slivers of cinnamon sticks and a hint of lemon. Then, I wait.

The tea must be perfect. This mere leaf water is part of my heritage; a proper cup of tea honors not only my parents but also the journey of my ancestors. As an Indian American whose father is a native of South Africa and mother of both Tanzania and England, I find unity across these cultures through tea.

Masala tea, or *chai*, not only is quintessential to Indian culture—in part due to British influence—but also plays a significant role in my familial history. My paternal great-grandfather was a *chaiwala*: he sold masala tea on the streets of Chikhli, Gujarat, eventually earning enough to venture to South Africa for economic opportunity. There, he came to fuse his chai with the famed Rooibos tea. My grandfather learned from him, and my dad from him, eventually reaching me. At the same time, my mother spent the first decade of her life on her family's farm, bordering both Tanzania and Kenya. Kenyan tea, notable for its hint of lemon, thus entered our family's tea repertoire. The over thirty years my mom spent in London augmented the presence of tea in her life, just as it would carry over to mine. This tea is my ancestral footprint and fills me with pride for being able to carry forth my cultural traditions.

Tea does not simply tell the journey of my ancestors; it is the vehicle through which I navigate my present. With family, tea is my unspoken language of love. What words cannot convey, a cup of *chai* always can. With friends, tea is an adventure from sipping chai lattes to finding the perfect boba tea at local cafés. With school, tea is the narrative that unites my passions for health and society, whether it be the beverage's rich antioxidants or role in pivotal historical events. With each other, tea is the world's most widely consumed beverage—a common thread that brings us together.