

High Tea

What's more enjoyable than a good cup of tea?

Answer: A luxurious cup of tea that gives back.

By Tara Loader Wilkinson

When I call Nirmal Sethia, founder of London-based luxury tea Brand Newby Teas, I am surprised when he reveals that he is sipping an espresso.

“It’s early and I need to make intelligent conversation’ he explains, somewhat apologetically. ‘I have a passion for tea but, sometimes, you know, you just need a coffee.’”

“Passion” is an understatement; today his company is practically synonymous with intricately packaged, silken-swathed luxury teas, poured in Michelin-starred restaurants and sipped in cafes from Grosvenor House to Champneys. Sethia, now in his 80s, founded the brand at the turn of the Millennium, in his own words to reinvoke the lost glory of tea. “With the industrialisation of trade in the 20th century, there was a loss of much of tea’s rich culture, as big brand compromised quality for quantity,” he explains. “We founded Newby to reintroduce quality teas to the market and revive the grandeur of tea culture.”

Sethia talks in the booming cadences of a preacher, as outspoken on his views on Britain’s high taxes (he just moved to Dubai) as he is passionate about a good brew. Sethia understands business and the luxury market, in fact, as the 10th generation of wealthy Indian jute merchants, you could say it runs in his blood.

But Sethia’s passion for tea began when he was 14, working as an apprentice tea buyer in London. At 16 he started his own tea-buying business in Calcutta, India, and later bought a tea garden in Assam where he lived in order to immerse himself in every aspect of tea cultivation. With Newby Teas he wanted to establish a company that truly valued the culture of tea. But what really sets the company apart is that a third of its proceeds go to Sethia’s own charitable N Sethia Foundation. It has diverse interests, predominantly in education, medicine and social welfare in the UK and India, where most of its tea-pickers are based. Causes include an autism centre in the UK; a



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Girl's literacy college in Rajasthan with an alumni of 35,000; a temple in Delhi; and a robotics surgical training centre at Imperial College London. Sethia says his reasons for giving were not always altruistic. "Earlier it was a pure ego trip, that I should be seen as giving. But I've been fortunate that throughout my life I've been able to contribute." Sethia is a devout Hindu and he attributes his success in business to God. "Failure and success, they're not in our hands, it's the divine will," he says. "Whatever wealth has been given to me belongs to God. I am merely a trustee.

As well as tea, Sethia is known for owning the world's largest private collection of teapots. He owns around 1,400 teapots and caddies, chronicling the evolution of teaware from Song Dynasty tea bowls and elaborate Satsuma teapots, to decadent Victorian tea sets.

"I started the Chitra Collection because no one else was privately protecting and preserving tea culture and the intricate masterpieces, which stretch back over the centuries of tea culture", he explains.

His teapots date back centuries. Some notable examples include a blue-and-silver Art Nouveau Fabergé tea caddy from 1910, and a Famille Verte Molded Ewer dating back to 1690, depicting Emperor Mu Wang's eight mythological horses. He owns teapots that belonged to Winston Churchill, Theodore Roosevelt, and Admiral Lord Nelson, some worth more than USD\$1m. But his favourite is the Silver-Gilt Monkey Teapot, made in 17th century Germany. "This teapot depicts a female monkey holding two of her young. It shows the evolution of tea culture, where semi-mechanisation and fantasy were put into creating a rare piece," he says. "It is so beautiful that even German porcelain manufacturer Meissen copied it in the 1730s." One of those copies, previously owned by the Duke of Windsor, is also in the Chitra Collection.

Although the collection is held in a private vault and is visited by invitation only, he sometimes loans pieces out to museums. A selection of the collection went on display to the public in the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Astana last year.

The Chitra Collection is named after Mr Sethia's late wife, whom he adored. "Following her death I could not build her the Taj Mahal, so I created the collection as an expression of gratitude for the support my wife gave me." ○

