





# COME *For* TEA

From the reviving morning 'cuppa' to the splendid ritual of *afternoon tea at the Ritz*, this once-rare delicacy has become Britain's 'go-to' drink and, along with gin, is enjoying an *overdue renaissance*.

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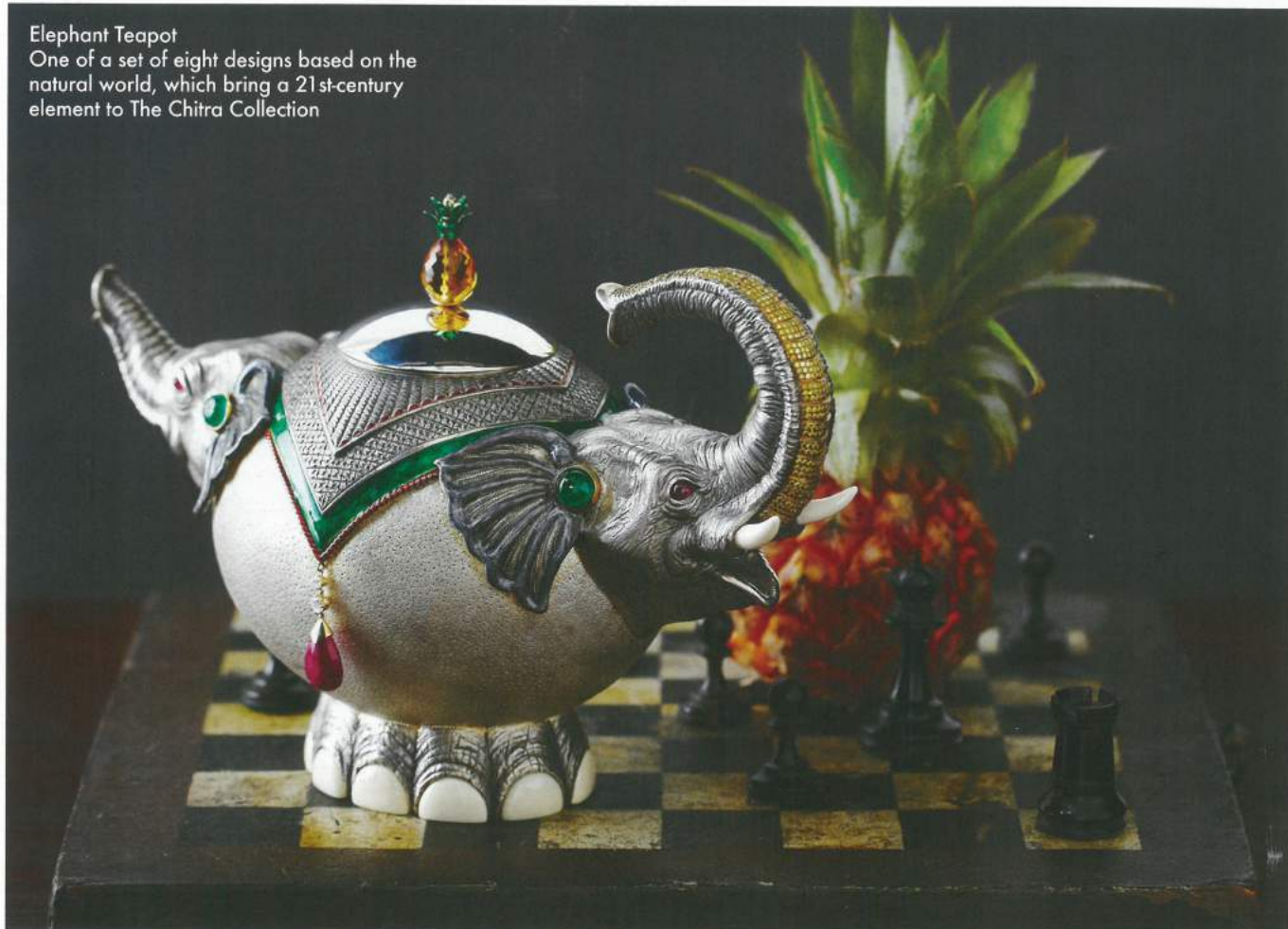
**T**HE TENS OF THOUSANDS flocking to the 'Fes-Tea-Val', celebrating National Tea Day and held this year in the glorious Georgian grounds of Chiswick House, south west London, were only the latest to be swept along in the enthusiasm for tea – a drink derived from the leaves of an originally obscure Chinese bush but which, ultimately, became a crucial trigger for the 18th century conflict between Britain and its American colonies. The festival itself was, by contrast, a roaring and harmonious success with hundreds of exhibitors keen to present their wares, most of which were relevant to the theme. In the marquees, master bakers of cakes and biscuits and blenders of exotically-flavoured black, green, herbal and fruit teas eagerly attracted an audience while, at their sides, might be displays of his-and-hers hats (needed in the sunshine!) and stands promoting the great outdoors. Among the various exhibitions, entertainments, gardens and masterclasses was a small, but exquisite, display of antique teaware, famous and historic items taken from the Chitra Collection, on show within the delightful Chiswick House itself.

Exhibiting prominently in the 'Tea 'n' Treat' section of the show was 'Newby', a major new player in the industry, successful in a highly competitive market despite the founder's declared aim to promote tea culture by putting the quality of the tea ahead of commercial considerations. His name is Nirmal Sethia and his working life commenced at 14, in London, as an apprentice tea-buyer. By the age of 18, he had started his own tea business in Kolkata, India and subsequently bought a plantation in Assam. This was just the start of his soaring international business career and it was not until the turn of the millennium that he returned to his first passion and established 'Newby', taking a labour of love to a higher level and winning 122 international awards in the process. Even today, Mr Sethia personally tastes every blend to ensure a high enough quality to bear the company name. The company has remained committed not only to the character and taste of their teas but also the history and culture. Sadly, his inspirational wife, Chitra, passed away and Mr Sethia, having previously established a charitable foundation supporting medical research, youth activities and disaster relief, started the tea-related collection, naming it in her honour. ▷



### Elephant Teapot

One of a set of eight designs based on the natural world, which bring a 21st-century element to The Chitra Collection



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This private foundation has, over the last 20 years, assembled the world's most valuable collection of historic teawares, numbering around 1700 pieces, only 35 of the most evocative of which were on show, amid high security. The aim was to showcase some of their finest and most historically significant items in order to shed light on over 5000 years of tea culture in China, later spreading to Japan and, only 500 years ago, to Europe, America and Russia. The oldest piece on show was a simple, Song Dynasty (960-1279) tea bowl of glazed earthenware, inspiring thoughts of past rituals. Among the weird (a small Meissen teapot of 1735 in the shape of a squatting monkey) and wonderful (a 2 feet tall Russian solid-silver samovar of 1879) exhibits were gems like Admiral Nelson's bachelor teapot, an enamelled silver-gilt tea caddy from Faberge and an exquisite silver-gilt Napoleonic teapot with a snake for a handle and a swan's neck for a spout.

Early in the 17th century, Portuguese and Dutch merchants introduced tea to the noble houses of Europe, along with Asian porcelain in which to serve it. It would take another century before the mystery of porcelain manufacture was solved, in Meissen, Germany. Although the East India Company started to import tea from China in 1669, it was not until they established plantations in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) that supply

started to meet the demand and prices started to fall. Even so, the upper classes fiercely defended their stocks of the precious leaves and the keys to the 'caddies' would have been as carefully kept as those of the cellar. The very best craftsmen, silversmiths like Paul Storr and Paul de Lamarie and the ceramic factories of Meissen, Sevres and Wedgwood, were commissioned to produce ornate pieces of great beauty in which to show off the style, and wealth, of the owners. In time, the price of tea fell to such a level that it could be enjoyed at all levels of society but not before, in 1773, British settlers in North America, resentful of high taxation levied on their favourite brew, took part in what is known as the 'Boston Tea Party', during which 314 chests of tea were unceremoniously tipped into the harbour. Three years later came the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Such was the power of tea and the passions it inspired!

Nowadays, it is unlikely that the people's brew is going to change history in such a dramatic fashion but, as long as companies like Newby keep on providing new flavour experience, in parallel with the tried and tested favourites, our tea habits will continue. Some have become almost ritualistic but most are what they have been for a century, a refreshing, relaxing or reviving break in the day. □