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Tycoon's tea collection reveals what powered Lord Nelson to victory




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Nirmal Sethia with part of his collection of teapots CREDIT: RII SCHROER

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One of the world's greatest collections of teapots and tea accessories is to go on public display revealing the drinking habits of their original owners, including the hero of Trafalgar, Lord Horatio Nelson.

Its centrepiece is Nelson's small silver teapot, with a wooden handle, ivory finial and long tapering spout, engraved with an 'N'.

“Tea is like a beautiful woman, never to be judged for her appearance, but for her character.”

Nirmal Sethia

The collection’s founder Nirmal Sethia, the owner of Newby Teas, says the fact the pot has no accompanying jug appears to confirm that – unlike most Britons today – Nelson drank his tea without milk.

“He did not have the time to put milk in his tea,” Mr Sethia told The Telegraph. It is a habit of which he heartily approves.

“Tea is like a beautiful woman, never to be judged for her appearance, but for her character. It is absolutely not OK to put milk in.”

His collection, made up of more than 1,700 pieces, is dedicated to the memory of his late wife Chitra.

“I could not build the Taj Mahal for her so I started this collection in her name,” he said.



Mr Sethia with his first wife Chitra

The tycoon plans to show the Chitra collection – now worth as much as £160 million and normally stored in a London vault – next year.

Other pieces include a silver tea-set given to Winston Churchill's daughter, Lady Mary Soames, by her father's private office on her wedding, a 1,000 year-old Chinese Song Dynasty set and a hand-painted service which Louis XVIII paid 10,000 francs for in 1816.

Mr Sethia started as an apprentice for a London tea merchant in the late 1950s, before setting up his own import business and buying a plantation in the north eastern Indian state of Assam and expanding into property and banking. But tea remains his first love.

He is convinced it is the mark of a civilised society and that consuming the beverage not only helped Nelson triumph over the French and Spanish navies at Trafalgar in 1805, but has also guided the decision making of world statesmen ever since.



Mr Sethia's collection is worth millions CREDIT: RII SCHROER

Indeed, the tea tycoon counts Russian president Vladimir Putin among his customers and likes to think of those he admires in terms of the kind of tea they would be.

Of Margaret Thatcher, who he first met in the late Seventies, he said: “She would be a million dollar tea, a vintage. She had the guts and courage of a million men put together.”

Mr Sethia’s tea retails from £5 for a small box of teabags to £1,500 for a diamond-encrusted caddy of luxury Muscani tea. He is unrepentant about the price.

“If you can’t afford a good tea, you can’t have a good tea,” he said. “There is no charity in tea.”

