

Bogawantalawa A Valley and A Tea Scribe



The front gate to a tea factory within the Bogawantalawa Valley.

Andrew Taylor points to a series of wide flat green slopes that descend into the Castlereigh Reservoir. Every point in the vista is the same: green fields and steep fissures of valleys, and a land surface that is completely covered in tea bushes. The Bogawantalawa valley is embedded and saturated with tea bushes to an extent that the tea literally *is* the valley.

It is an area that Andrew knows well. Not far from where we stand he has a small bungalow, from which he manages tea's growth, ensures its quality, and creates teas that will be formed as black tea for the export market. Known around the island, he is one of the maestro's of Sri Lanka's tea world. He is also, I am happily finding out, a character with much of the wonderful eccentricity that so many tea-obsessed folk have.

Nothing from Andrew comes without a necessary bit of wonderful rambling-on about some little detail (historical, a favorite tea bush, or a long dead landowner), in his deep rumbling English public school accent with a necessary hint of Sinhalese. Of Sri Lankan origin with some not-so-distant DNA from of old colonial times Andrew is both a fusion of cultures, and a man who has spent every day of the last 40 years sipping, speaking of, managing, and thinking about the leaf. Not only does he know the soil; he knows the planters, the pickers, and he knows each and every step of tea-making in these parts. He has spent much time with tea and he will spend much more. Some say (though he remains silent about this matter) that he is related to one James Taylor of colonial tea estate fame. The fact that he says nothing and offers nothing on the topic to some degree reassures me that his interest is tea and only tea, and besides I am here to meet him rather than any relative long gone.

Now, tucked into Sri Lanka's mountainous interior he simply speaks of the tea world he knows, though I feel we are building to actually sipping a cup shortly. At least I hope we are! Knowledgeable but modest, he freely admits that there are "many regions of the tea world that I'd like to know".

"Whatever you see here in this entire valley used to be jungle". The last word "jungle" is drawn out in two very precise syllables as though he has a picture, even now, of what this jungle once looked like. In his frame of reference tea was a gift to the island's prosperity and it now needs not only maintenance but new ideas as well.

Moments later, restive Andrew has moved on and is urging me to another vista pointing to some low thick trunked tea bushes. "There you see. Those are relatively old compared to the others". Nothing from a distance – except for the thickness of the trunks – belies their age.

These "old" bushes are older but by no means *old* when one thinks of the centuries' old tea trees of Yunnan, but any tea bushes, trees, or shrubs, that have made it intact beyond a few decades warrant attention and a slight bit of awe on my part. Pruned rather than permitted to express themselves fully as giant, coiled branches, these tight bushes have long been the source of a gargantuan amount of black tea that the western world has consumed.

Nearby Hatton and Nuwara Eliya are complete tea hubs and so completely inundated and based around the leaf that they haven't even bothered to put on a veneer of tourism. They don't need to. But here, at the renowned Tea Trails, where a series of luxurious but discreet bungalows sit tucked into valleys and perch on ridgelines, it is a different world. Andrew is the resident tea scribe and the properties rest under his tea tutelage and twitchy 'tea-affected' eyes. Here one can take in harvesting, cultivation, and the processing, all in a tight network of people and spaces devoted to the leaf, and its export.

Finally taking a nicely astringent cup with Andrew as bats begin their dusk raids through the silky air around us, he shares with me details of his daily tea ritual. He is in every sense of the word a complete tea-totaler rarely taking any alcohol. In his rumbling words, “the brain feels addled if I indulge”.

Starting each and every day with a strong cup of black tea from the nearby slopes he ushers in the day on his veranda. What always impresses about the man isn't simply his knowledge, but rather his commitment to tea as an ideal, even though it is his business. Later on in each and every day Andrew will take another two to three cups. He mentions that he never rushes a cup of tea and he always takes time to sit and savor the fluid. He never adds sugar, or milk to any of his teas, explaining that milk can too often hide a tea's true character, and he is so obviously a man who enjoys knowing a tea entirely. He speaks very much like many in the tea world who deplore additions to the sacred leaf, decrying such behavior as almost criminal.

In his words, a good black Ceylon tea should “grab the tongue, the gums, and the teeth, and then release”. This little bit of wisdom comes with its own immaculate bit of theatre as Andrew demonstrates how the tea must be inhaled in with a loud and sudden intake, rolled around in the mouth, over the tongue and then considered by both the palate and the mind. As he demonstrates I warm to his passion. It is so earnest and theatrical that it cannot possibly be disliked.

Our day is coming to an end signaled by the ever-increasing activity of the ranks of bats that come out to feed on insects. Fortunately my time with Andrew and his detailed tea brain isn't coming to an end just yet. Tomorrow morning he will host me on a factory tour to explain the leaf in Ceylon, and he will explain that beyond simply an industry, there is still some craft left on the island whose black tea production was created specifically to supply nations that preferred the addition of milk.

He adds (and he often does this ‘adding of a small detail or point of interest’) a rarely mentioned point regarding the addition of milk to our beloved fluid, though as always, he is both polite and sage-like in his analysis.

“There are proteins within milk that block beneficial elements within tea. Tea should be taken without milk...though I understand from a taste perspective the desire”. This last point he adds almost hastily as though not wanting to offend the masses that are absent from our discussion but need milk's softening addition to their cups.

His last words of the evening to me are an answer to a direct question I've put to him, wondering where else he could imagine himself being or living.

“I belong here where I feel know my role. My role is to be close to these bushes. I would like to visit other places but only for a short time...yes, I belong here”.

Morning brings a renewed Andrew (though I cannot say I'd ever up to that point seen an Andrew not looking fresh and vigorous). The morning air is only slightly crisper but Andrew, I imagine, has been up since dawn first took hold of the sky, sipping that first tea taking in this land that he is so indebted to and in love with. He fiddles with his hands eager to begin a tour of a local tea factory. Almost entirely staffed by Tamils when in operation, today - due to a Hindu festival - most of its tea workers are absent. Only a few operate the huge rollers, dryers, and filtration machines. Long racks of withering leaves, occupying the size of an airport hangar, buzz as fans blow air through the bottom frames.

Machines that are still functioning after 60 years sit impeccably clean and ready. Though a far larger scale of production than I am used to, this nonetheless represents a different kind of precision and Andrew has the kind of personality to insist on precision.

Getting closer to a little office that will serve as a tasting room for us, I notice a low-lying wall of small square openings like in a post-office. Each small opening - perhaps 3-inches square - has a name written above it. In many of the squares there are packets of white paper. Before I can ask a question that I suspect I know the answer to, Andrew is nodding and smiling.

"Tea samples", he tells me. "They will be sent to our agents in Colombo, who will then offer the samples up to buyers. Tea is big business...which is why we must remember to enjoy the odd cup".

When he utters these words, he is simultaneously organizing a sampling of our own, with a young helper wrapped in a sarong racing around preparing serving cups and taster cups. It seems we've suddenly come to a moment when a sip is an answer and tonic to everything.

The first cup awaits us at last, and Andrew's face cracks into a huge smile. "Come Jeff, it is time". It is a testament to an absolute adoration when someone who's business is tea, sips nothing else, and understands it like few do, still glows with the possibility of taking a quick sip...or as I'm to find out later, not simply a quick sip but an afternoon of them.



Tea pathways near Bogawantalawa which stretch for miles. A valley may have harvesters from multiple tea companies picking simultaneously, and the resulting teas will have both the valley name along with the company name.

During a brief lull in harvesting. Tea in Sri Lanka is generally plucked non-stop throughout the year with bushes being entirely pulled out every 30+ years to allow for new plants to grow.



One of the many withering racks which has air piped in below the leaves.



Irreplaceable Andrew Taylor in the midst of one of his wonderful tangents on the loves, cups, and leaves of tea.



Caselereigh Reservoir in the background within the Bogawatalawa Valley. The valley's teas are considered some of the island's better examples of black tea.

