

## *Jungpana's Island in the Sky*



*Darjeeling town sits in its iconic setting with the not-so-distant Kanchenjunga (3rd highest peak in the world) in the background. The town swells and is at bursting point while the Darjeeling tea estates rest in valleys outside the town proper. Nearby Kalimpoing was one of the main endpoints of the Tea Horse Road, and many Tibetans have settled in the region. Tea, Mountains and trade were all bound for centuries in the region, though the Darjeeling tea history is a much more recent addition.*

One tea-truth that resides within the tea world (despite hype and hyperbole) refers to the irrefutable aspect of providence and raw materials. If you have great raw material. A second vital truth is linked to the first...that a great tea needs competent and caring hands (and the inevitable stages) to manage its journey to the cup. It is at this point that a tea becomes a classic.

Pine scents rage through the air at the Darjeeling tea bastions of Goomtee and Jungpana where legends past and present are alive and well on the estate that locals call "The Island in the Mountains". Locals from the nearby manic little swell of Kurseong town say that the Jungpana Estate is one of the rare estates where the sanctity of the leaf is kept from pluck until cup. It is one of the gardens that hasn't hit a peak trending 'moment', but rather one that has consistently hummed along gently but assuredly convincing waves of drinkers of its quality. Marketing campaigns haven't made it a 'tea of the month' and its packaging doesn't rage color or splashy bright graphics. Everything about it whispers quality.

The factory of Jungpana cannot be missed, lying slightly down from where I'm perched in the sister estate of Goomtee, sitting with tea in hand. Huge letters adorn the burgundy factory roof which sits elegantly decaying – a common enough site throughout the region where the Himalayas begin to swell and expand from the flatlands.

Goomtee's own teas are classic Darjeelings with an almost divine presence overseeing every single stage. Graceful and minimal in words and movements, the GM, Mr. Mudgal, is revered amid faithful Darjeeling sippers and competition alike. He is someone who oversees every single aspect with grace and a kind of disciplined fervor. He is one who maintains a careful grip and watch upon every single batch that emerges from his factory. For myself, this journey is into a world beyond my normal fascination with Wulong and Puerhs and into one of the great sanctums of classic dark teas. My journey has brought me to Jungpana because of two long ago but sumptuous tastings, and the fact that I know very little of this particular world of teas. Journeys should always be stimulated something tangible that sets the mind and blood alight. Jungpana did that. Now I stare at the factory that lies amid green wandering bands of green; I stare at the source of me not so long ago 'joy-in-a cup'.

Within easy drives from here the great classics of Darjeeling are accessible. Makabari, Turbo, and Margaret's Hope along with a phalanx of other epics in the Darjeeling tea world can be explored but after a month on the Darjeeling tea path, slurping and gushing (and occasionally wretching) and listening, I've arrived at a place, which has only become more desirable to me.

A blurry humidity hangs in the windless air and everything is slightly soft in focus, as if the whole scene is an apparition. The notion of this being an "island" is reinforced with a still higher ridge line perfectly encompassing this valley of green stimulant fuel-in-waiting.

The walk bends and winds through the fields and mini-estates and gardens within the Jungpana jurisdiction. Muscatel, Mahalderam, and Jungpana gardens are all carefully (though invisible to the eye) marked and each harvest contains hand written notes on the garden number, date, time, and conditions of plucking. No detail here is too small to be of consequence and a huge graph with weather variations covering every single month's rainfall sits for all to see. My little guide is dressed up for the walk and is adamant that I 'see' each of the "tea-necessary" elements that the region has in ample supply: drainage, altitude, and streams that roar and plunge from the heights. One can feel the land's rolling lines, and it is this feeling that is necessary to get more sense of the teas that emanate from the region and from where they originate – it remains an immaculate zone where the angled drainage, the soil and the south facing slopes and the altitudes and isolation ooze hospitality for the camellia plants.

Another of the vitals of the plants themselves is that they are what is called locally as "China". Clonal varieties (hybrids that attempt to bring together multiple characteristics) exist throughout Darjeeling but many purists steadfastly argue that the

'China' produces more depth and a better flavor for Darjeelings. This detail is one that is rarely mentioned but it remains an absolutely crucial piece of the Darjeeling foundation.

Altitudes within the Jungpana family range from 914-1370 meters, and still now landslides frequently wipe out the little cart track that links Jungpana with Goomtee and the rest of the tea drinking world. There is some comfort in the fact that as much as it might limit the distribution of the tea, it also protects the estates a little from the outside world (at least that is the thought the spins in my mind as I traipse along the little path – "keep man at a comfortable distance"). Nature here still holds sway and man hasn't yet learned how to control the environment completely. Mr. Mugdal, the GM put it this way, "Every garden is different and every estate has its specialties. I'm only interested in mine here". His view is that skillsets needed to be able to match the environment's offerings, however random. "It is nature that gives us these things. We are not doing our job if we cannot adapt and manage with our skills".

Arriving to Jungpana's factory is akin to arriving at a sacred shrine of sorts for me with the efforts to produce special leaves being like small gifts. Many of the workers are at home in the nearby villages which dot the valley and even sit within the estates themselves. In much of this part of the world, Estates (good ones at least) take care of the communities that provide workers to their fields with everything from healthcare to building schools. Slowly but surely large companies in far flung grey cities are buying up the estates and the fabled names. Goomtee, Jungpana, Mahalderam and Muscatel remain in the private ownership of families that still hope there is a way to remain relevant and relatively small simultaneously.

A small room with mist-enhanced light blasting in uniform waves serves as a welcoming room and the all important tasting space. Cups are lined up with a selection of autumn teas and their dark clear fluids are dots that beckon in the light colored room.

Samples are not simply fluids. There are scratched notes on pieces of paper behind each and every sample explaining exactly which gardens (or combination of gardens) the tea is from, which section and which estate.

The Spring harvests bring the light subtle florals, while the much the sought-after second flushes carry a larger width and bite, while the autumns are heavier still and perhaps lacking some of the subtleties but they suit fine. They come to the palate with some force but ease off and remain in wafts. They please...and one of the inherent 'laws of the tea world' is once again made evident: that good materials produced with knowledgeable and careful hands will produce a very good tea. After that, it is simply a question of whose palate is being teased and the question of subjective palates.

Another little gem of wisdom soon after a particular selection is purchased is made clear. All of the manipulations and deft handling and treating of a tea should not in any way disconnect a tea from its soils. Masters of the tea world know how to (in gentle

and competent terms) massage and ease flavors - that are inherent - out of the leaves. Here at the Goomtee and Jungpana estates, even small batches of 3-5 kg's are tested personally before they leave for clients wherever they may be.

My order is made of a particular autumn that fancied my own palate during the tastings. The leaves I choose are from a higher patch of near the Mahalderam gardens and have a potent residue that hits the palate with a powerful imprint and with that imprint my mind can enjoy the process by which it came to rest in the cup before me.

Silver half-kilo vacuum pack bags arrive from a pickup hours later, packed up with scribbled notes in black marker upon them. Nothing garish at all...the garishness is nestled deep within the bag in the shape of dried leaves.



*Elegant Mr. Mudgal (at left) does a quick sampling on his daily run through new tea productions. He is viewed by all in the industry and amongst the sippers as someone utterly committed to maintaining precision and consistency throughout the Goomtee Tea Estate, which neighbours Jungpana. If one is to visit the area, one absolutely has to visit Mr. Mudgal.*

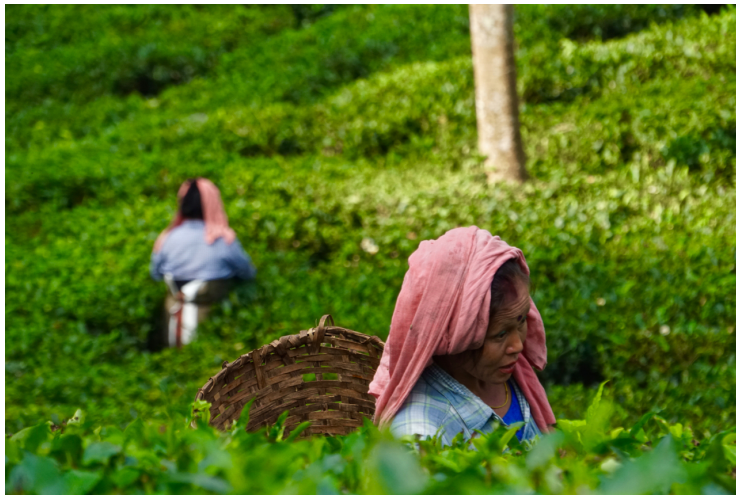
*The time has come for one - of many many many - samplings at the Jungpana estate. Tastings are essential, but it isn't simply the taste that is vital; the way the leaves look, smell, and release their flavours all matter. When looking at the leaves and the nectar one looks for clarity regardless of the strength of the infusion.*







*Deeper into the tastings, the conversations begin about where each sample is from and what the soil conditions, drainage, and weather is like during and before the leaves were harvested. Each sample has a little story.*



*Tea harvesters within the entire Darjeeling region face stresses with pay and conditions, with many estates being increasingly criticized for the conditions and compensation of the harvesters. Estates act as overseers for conditions, health, education and housing for entire communities. Some do it better than others.*

*Within the precious 'creation zones' of the Jungpana factory where tea leaves sit to dry in even depths at specific temperatures.*







*I get into a little sipping action within the Goomtee factory tasting room. One cannot simply write about the leaves....one has to get a little stuck in at times.*



*Morning in the tasting room as preparations begin anew for a new series of tastings at Goomtee*



*Young sapling tea plants await their time to be replanted into the soils. New generations that will continue what their parents and their grandparents began.*