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If we were to put a first-flush Darjeeling at one end of the tea quality spectrum, the teas of **Iran and Turkey** would land on the opposite end. Radioactive contamination, pesticides and even domestic consumers' dislike of the product have **tarnished their reputations**, forever relegating them to the cheapest of blends.

Dogubayazit, the fort between Mt. Ararat and the Turkish-Iranian border

AN EPIC JOURNEY

# TRACING TEA

IRAN & TURKEY: DRINKING THE UNDRINKABLE

... Let it not be said, however, that Tracing Tea is easily deterred. You cannot truly judge the quality of a tea, good or bad, unless you appreciate and understand the characteristics of the full quality spectrum. Perhaps even more important, every tea and every place have a story to tell, and the stories of lesser teas may be the most interesting of all.

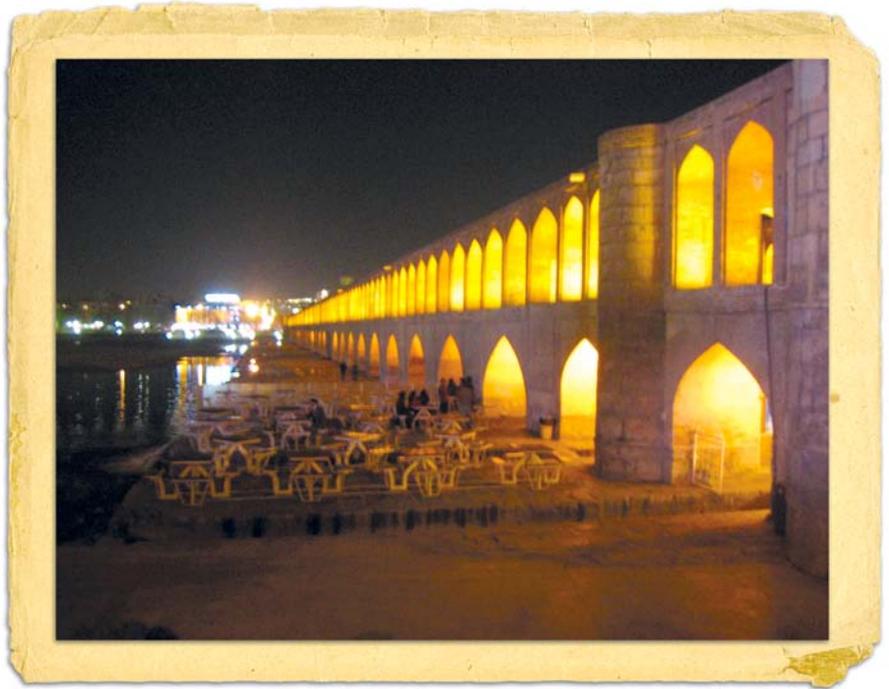
First on our list of producers of purportedly undrinkable tea was the Islamic Republic of Iran. Once famous across the world for the wealth of its kings, the splendor of its cities and the sophistication of its culture, Iran now more often than not brings to mind religious fanaticism, nuclear posturing and the fight for control of oil in the Persian Gulf. Visions of barren deserts baked by the sun dominate popular imagination, detracting from the fact that Iran's terrain is as diverse as its people.

Legend has it that tea first came to Iran with Kublai Khan, grandson of the infamous Mongol raider Genghis Khan. However, while tea drinking has been popular in the country since at least the 14th century, planting was not begun here until Prince Mohammad Mirza, mayor of Tehran, went as Iran's ambassador to India in the 19th century. Realizing the British would not part easily with their hard-gained knowledge of tea production, Mirza posed as a French laborer and gained employment on a British-run tea estate. He studied the production process, stole tea saplings and returned swiftly to Iran, planting his own tea estates in the north-west area of the country.

Iran's modern estates are in the Gilan region, bordering the Caspian Sea. It's this proximity to the coast that gives Gilan the rainfall and lower temperatures required for tea cultivation. Iran's tea fields produce 128,000 pounds of tea each year and also serve as a popular picnic spot for wealthy Tehranis on vacation.

The majority of tea in Iran is consumed either at home or in teahouses, where men gather to gossip, discuss politics, recite poetry and do business. Relaxing at small tables or lounging on Persian carpets, they consume glasses of hot tea with sticky pastries flavored with honey and nuts, the sweetness of the honey providing the ideal accompaniment to Iran's favorite beverage.

However, while Iranians drink 265,000 pounds of tea a year, their tea industry today produces just 33,000 pounds of that, and past years' produce is stockpiling in warehouses. In fact, it has been estimated that as many as 485,000 pounds of Iranian tea may have been left to rot. The reasons for this are twofold: Firstly, aging bushes, some of which are nearly 100 years old, and outdated farming methods are producing a low-quality product. Secondly, products labeled as having been made abroad, even if they are in fact repackaged Iranian goods, have a certain cache amongst the Iranian public. The charmingly named Elizabeth



**TEAHOUSE** by the Si-o-se Pol bridge in Isfahan, Iran

Tea brand, so named as to evoke the memory Queen Elizabeth II, claims to be made in England but purportedly contains Iranian tea, flavored with artificial additives abroad before being returned to Iran.

With the domestic industry in such dire straits, the Iranian government has pledged to buy 50 percent of all tea crops, which explains the glut of Iranian tea in warehouses. Import duty levied on tea coming into the country may have helped fund this ambitious scheme, but unfortunately, legal imports are being dwarfed by the amount of tea being smuggled in. According to official figures, 165,000 pounds of tea come into the country illegally each year, most of it overland from Pakistan and Turkey. Not only has the government been unable to prop up domestic tea production, it has also lost control of supplies coming from abroad.

From Gilan we crossed over the border to Turkey and the fort of Dogubayazit. The first sight that rises out of the horizon is Mount Ararat, refuge of Noah and holy site for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Even in a country as adamantly secular as Turkey, the important legacy of religion cannot be overlooked. The Turkish tea-growing region of Rize is climatically and geographically similar to that of Gilan, but in this case it's the Black Sea that cools and moistens the air. The region may be well suited to growing tea, but it's this same location that has caused untold damage to the Turkish tea industry for the past two decades.

In the early hours of an otherwise unremarkable morning in April 1986, the catastrophic explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Belarus made the surrounding areas forever uninhabitable. People across the world looked on in horror as radioactive clouds spread as far away as Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. The northern coast of Turkey was badly affected, as

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it was the first territory hit by the clouds as they passed over the Black Sea from the Ukraine. Turkey's entire tea crop was irradiated, as was the soil in which it grew. The Turkish Atomic Energy Authority intervened before the tea was packed, demanding that about 128,000 pounds of contaminated Turkish tea be destroyed. Scientists were divided as to whether burning or burying this tea, now classified as radioactive waste, was preferable.

Turkey's remaining tea crop was mixed with 121,000 pounds of uncontaminated tea, some of which was left from the previous year's harvest and the rest of which was imported from India and China. This reduced the radiation levels to below 12.5 Becquerel per kilogram, the threshold considered safe by the European community, meaning the tea could be drunk domestically. However, although all the tea that made it onto the market in the late 1980s was deemed safe, the name "Chernobyl tea" continues to hang over the Turkish tea industry, denting consumer confidence abroad.

Today, the domestic tea market in Turkey has largely recovered. The population consumes 5.5 pounds of tea per capita each year, much of which is produced by the state-owned company AYKUR. The country is self-sufficient in tea production, and the retail market has grown roughly 5 percent each year during the past decade. While loose black tea is still prevalent (almost 90 percent of retail volume sales, as green tea was not introduced to the country until as late as 1999), tea bags are becoming increasingly popular among the urban population. Tea bag sales increased 34 percent between 1997 and 2004 (spearheaded by Lipton, Unilever and Lotte), and because Turkey has the fastest-growing consumer market in Europe, this upward trend looks set to continue.

When it comes to exporting, however, Turkey's road to recovery is far from complete. Whereas the Soviet Union had been a regular purchaser of Turkish tea throughout the 1980s, the shortage on the international market after the Chernobyl disaster gave Indian tea producers a foothold in Russia. Turkish companies with a presence in the former USSR, particularly Central Asia, are now once again aggressively advertising their tea with eye-catching packaging, in-store display units and billboard ads in an attempt to claw back their market share. While in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic, we encountered the hard-sell tactics of the Turkish company Beta Stores, which owns Bishkek's most popular supermarket. Beta's brand of Turkish tea, available in seemingly infinite varieties, was stacked floor to ceiling in a purpose-built, walk-in display unit in the center



**A TURKISH** tea set customarily includes sugar cubes, to be placed between the drinker's lips rather than in the glass.

of the store. Chinese and Indian teas may well have also been for sale, but due to Turkish tea's prominent position, garish packaging and attractive offers, it certainly would have been a Kyrgyz customer's first point of call.

As with Iranian teas, the greatest hurdle the Turkish tea industry must pass abroad is that of quality. In darkened shops, bathhouses and market places across Turkey, we sampled the dark, bitter flavor of Turkish teas, burning with a deep, orange glow in delicate glasses shaped like tulips. The smell is slightly acrid, and no one—local or foreign—would consider drinking it without the addition of a few large cubes of sugar to take the edge off its astringency. This sickly sweet brew, with its harsh aftertaste across the tongue, is largely unacceptable to customers in the United States and Europe, so it can only be utilized as a bulking agent in lower-quality blends. Russian and Middle Eastern countries still look predominantly to China and India for their tea supplies, and the African estates can undercut almost all of their competitors, including Turkey, when producing teas for blends at the lower end of the market.

The solution to both Iran and Turkey's problems, theoretically at least, is simple. The practice, of course, may be more complicated. Both countries have large enough tea-drinking populations to consume their entire crops, and in the case of Iran, even more. If they blend their own product with higher-quality imports, sell the blends at competitive prices and market them aggressively, the tea producers of Iran and Turkey may still have a fighting chance of success at home. Then, as the market expands, they can tackle markets abroad. ☪