

FROM THE AUTHOR OF  
SNAKE OIL

THE WAY OF

TEA

AND

JUSTICE

Rescuing the World's Favorite Beverage  
From Its Violent History



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# A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF TEA

FIRST, AN EXPLANATION OF the recipes used at the beginning of each chapter: Acquiring all the ingredients to blend your own tea isn't easy but is well worth the effort. The blends and brands highlighted are well-known recipes offered by connoisseurs and pilgrims who have traveled far and wide to learn about taste and healing properties. They come from a variety of suppliers who specialize in a range of teas. Some of the teas highlighted are specifically selected because of their commitment not only to taste but also to the justice offered in the leaves to the people and land that grow them. You can find most of these blends at the places listed in this book and in books such as *Book of Tea*, James Norwood Pratt's *Tea Dictionary*, and *Taking Tea*. A wealth of information and recipes is also available online.

My hope is that you find blends that leave a good taste in your mouth, mind, and soul as you're led down an old and grounded spiritual path. Always look for teas that do not harm the people picking or packing them. Sometimes doing this requires researching beyond the fair-trade label

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and into the harvesters' stories. Some teas listed are herbal tinctures and do not contain actual tea plants.

Even though there is just one plant known as tea, factors such as processing, geography, and rainfall combine into making a countless variety of teas that have different flavors, textures, colors, and aromas. Most tea experts divide these into eight major categories—black, green, white, oolong, pu-erh, herbal, yerba maté, and bush tea<sup>1</sup>—as well as a plethora of subcategories. These basic teas are like the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, which provides a strong foundation on which to build all the other categories of tea. Just as with keys on a piano, there are only eight notes in one octave, but once sharps, flats, ascending and descending order, timing, and creativity are added in, endless melodies emerge.

Throughout this book, I've included recommendations on how, where, and to whom to serve tea, because your *intention* as you serve is essential in the way of tea. How the plants are grown, how the water is boiled, how the serving cup is handled, and whom you share the beverage with can transform a plain black tea into a luxurious treat and a means for promoting justice across the world. Without concern for the tea or the way it is manufactured, an afternoon cup of expensive first-blush tea from an exotic region can leave you with a bitter taste in your mouth that is still parched for justice.

The idea for starting a teahouse called the Thistle Stop Café arose out of my work for Thistle Farms, a not-for-profit women's social enterprise based in Nashville, Tennessee, that

employs fifty women. The organization began in 2001 as part of a program of residential communities called Magdalene that stand in solidarity with women who have survived lives of trafficking, addiction, and prostitution. I'd founded Thistle Farms because while we were helping women survive, they were unable to find work due to their criminal histories, addiction, and trauma. When we began, we were simply an all-natural bath and body care company with "Love Heals" as our tagline. We wanted the company to be run by the women, for the healing of the women, and to have a product that could engage us in the wider culture to discuss the myths and truths about why women walk the streets and what it takes to welcome those same women back home.

Over the past fifteen years, we built up a business generating more than \$1 million annually, yet we still have a long waiting list of women looking for meaningful employment, which is critical to their economic independence and healing. Adding a new café could provide jobs and the opportunity for women to serve the thousands of visitors who come to Thistle Farms every year to see this community in action. In initial ideas for the café, I knew tea would need to play a central role to further the ambiance and story.

As if on cue, my friend Fiona, a native of Ireland, called to share some of her knowledge and love of tea. As I shared the new vision for the café, Fiona affirmed that tea could become central to our venture into justice. She offered to host a tea party at her home so we could begin to learn the way of tea. I gathered with eight others from the community

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of Thistle Farms around her dining room table. We were awestruck by the care for detail: three-layer serving dishes, tiny sandwiches, scones with real cream, and proper china teacups. I was mesmerized by the way tea set the mood of the table and the generosity expressed in the serving. By the time we left her house, everyone was ready to host a tea party at Thistle Farms. Especially me.

More than anything, I craved the relaxation and rest that drinking tea could bring to my life and to the community. Thistle Farms is no small enterprise. We manufacture and ship almost half a million products around the globe each year. In addition, we've helped launch more than twenty sister programs across the country. While our community is a refuge, it's also a place where dozens of employees and volunteers scurry around with various responsibilities and tasks. Some days it feels like a vortex of chaos. We don't have a set hierarchical structure, so decisions are made by casual consensus. This is a beautiful model in principle, but in practice it can be a bit confusing and frustrating. The frustration is compounded by the fact that on any given day in the life of a recovering woman, any employee may relapse.

Maybe it's this chaos that fueled the fantasy that groups of people, myself included, could gather in a peaceful space and sip tea. Perhaps I had allowed tea to woo me into believing that it could bring peace to work each day. I didn't calculate just how much *more* daily work would be required in opening the new café.

## *Chapter Two*

# DREAMING A CUP OF TEA



## **A Rwandan Black Tea**

Rwanda was estimated to produce almost one quarter of the fair-trade tea imported into the United States in 2012. Drinking teas that are part of the Rainforest Alliance programs and the Ethical Tea Partnership, both organizations in Rwanda committed to working with tea growers, ensures ecologically sensitive land use as well as good working conditions and fair treatment for workers. Rwandan black tea can be blended with other herbs that make it even more delicious, uplifting, and hopeful.

To make an uplifting tea for winter, use St. John's wort for a healthy and tasty combination with a kick of positivity.

Boil water in a kettle.

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Mix 2 tablespoons Rwandan black tea with 1 tablespoon St. John's wort. Place the mixture into a loose-leaf holder inside a teapot and let steep 3 minutes.

Enjoy with a friend, and remind one another of the beautiful landscapes of the world that are healing from wars and keeping hope alive.

SMALL TEA STAINS ON the pages of my well-read tea books look like breadcrumbs on a path toward the insight I long for. I keep sipping tea and flipping pages and finding myself heading down a windy path that leaves me in awe. Sipping tea invites us to imagine the plant's origins, soil, roots, and journey to the cup. Drinking tea opens an old, old story that is worth knowing. Tracing the roots of tea back to the beginning gives tea a richer flavor and helps us figure out how we went astray so that we can reclaim the goodness of the plant and get back on course. Like humanity, tea begins with original grace in a place called Eden where there was nothing to distinguish a weed from a flower.

In *The Story of Tea*, Mary Lou and Robert J. Heiss give a wonderful description of how the first wild tea plants originated from the Yunnan region in China known as the Seven Tea Mountains. Tea explorers like them have written about tea plants there that rise sixty feet into the air and are over a thousand years old. These plants in the forest of China are the Eve in the mother line of tea plants, and they have witnessed the spinning of the earth around the sun hundreds of times over. Humanity's life span is fleeting compared to those old Chinese plants.

While native varieties are found in Assam, India, and South China, they are part of the same botanical classification, and horticulturists have concluded that there is only



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one species called tea in the world. This one species of tea plant, the *Camellia sinensis*, means that all the tea we drink, whether from India, South America, or China, shares a common heritage and is related. Thus tea becomes a beautiful symbol of the theological truth that we are all connected, and although each kind of processed tea has different effects and flavors, it's like love: It all comes from the same source but can be expressed a thousand ways. Not only are we drinking something beautiful, we are sipping something universal both in its roots and its application. Tea is the tie that binds us, and the tea we drink invites us to share a common heritage with the whole world. By finding and drinking teas from anywhere in the world that are grown and picked with justice as a core value of tea owners and growers, we are sharing a cup with a world that still thirsts to reclaim our past for a more equitable future. When we drink tea, we are connected to every other tea drinker in the world by the virtue of the common plant and the global trade. A woman who has taken off her burka in the safety of a friend's parlor in Saudi Arabia is having a common experience of fellowship to that of a man walking into the famous London department store Harrod's for an afternoon tea. A new mom leaning over a small stove heating water in rural Kenya is sharing the anticipation that a woman in Tokyo feels in a high-rise downtown after a long day of work. Tea calls us to her altar and doesn't discriminate or judge. It is truly a holy drink throughout the world. No other drink besides water carries such a claim or connects us so literally.

The first stories of tea being cultivated date back more

than thirty-five hundred years to an emperor harvesting the first of what we associate now as green tea. A thousand years later, the curing process would develop, and black tea would be processed. Tea's history is central to the history of the Eastern world. By the Shang dynasty, in the eleventh century BCE, tea was beginning to be used for medicinal purposes. Seven hundred years later, in the Zhou dynasty, around the third century BCE, people began to boil the leaves for consumption. About the time that Jesus walked through Galilee, the first tea gardens were being cultivated in Sichuan Province. The journey of tea continued to be refined for another two thousand years in its planting, processing, and serving.

The historical journey of tea often parallels the history of trade as well as the struggle for power and wealth. In the sixth century of the modern era, leaves were first steamed and made into hard tea cakes that could be transported. This shift opened up new trade possibilities and allowed for the addition of spices into the tea because the cakes preserved the tea. It also meant that tea became a currency that could be traded. Monks on pilgrimages first carried tea from the forests of China into Japan, and tea became one of the currencies used throughout Mongolia, across central Asia, and into Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Tibet. Along with silk and cotton, tea became a major currency of trade, and routes were created to support its rich economic benefits. Tea was a powerful commodity, and by the twelfth century other industries like porcelain making and transportation grew up around it. By the seventeenth century, Portuguese and Dutch traders were transporting tea to England in the growing

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import sector of the economy. The trading of tea would lead to smuggling, death, wars, treaties, and enslavement.

In *A Brief History of Tea* by Roy Moxham there are stories about the impact of importing tea into England in the mid-eighteenth century. There is one story that details how tea smugglers captured two law enforcement officers, tortured them, and buried one alive. When the gang of tea smugglers was finally captured, “they were to be hanged, and then—a punishment hugely feared—to be chained and left hanging in the open as a warning.” The story illustrates the power beyond the drink and the desire to control its trading. Smuggling, burying people alive, and hanging as punishment are testimony to the importance of tea and its ability to influence global trading practices and laws as well as incite the mistreatment of humans.

Tea led to the battle cry for the Revolutionary War in the United States and instigated the Opium Wars in China. Through the journey of tea we can trace how international trade dramatically changed after the Opium Wars and how the secrets of processing tea were stolen and exported throughout the world. These events will be explored later in the book, but it is important to note here that looking at tea’s past can illuminate deeper truths about history. Tea provides a window through which we can view a global history.

One of the most fascinating paragraphs in tea’s long history is how the dowry of Princess Catherine of Portugal for King Charles II of England contained a chest of tea and the gift of Bombay (Mumbai), both of which led to the growth

of what was arguably the most powerful corporation the world has known, the East India Trading Company. Charles II gave this company power to launch its own ships of war and to provide “for ever hereafter . . . the whole entire and only trade and traffick . . . to and from the said East Indies.”<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the tea estates in India was a source of unimaginable oppression and untold wealth for the British colonies of India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The growing of tea requires cheap labor, and the colonization of India and countries in Africa provided it through exploited labor. In the late nineteenth century, the conditions for transporting labor from remote farming villages to the tea estates were abysmal, resulting in some mortality rates as high as 50 percent due to cholera, malaria, and malnourishment.<sup>4</sup>

The conditions on the tea estates in India into the twentieth century include stories of rapes, beatings, and shootings of the workforce by estate owners and managers. There are reports from tea planters in the early twentieth century that “a manager may assault a laborer, insult him, and take girl after girl from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority.”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout its history, tea has been not only witness to war and treaties but companion on many of the great explorations of the last five hundred years. There are great stories and examples of how tea helped warm weary hearts and minds as Europeans took to the seas to find new countries to conquer and unseen tundra upon which to sink their flags. Tea was used to keep men warm aboard the *Endurance* in 1914 when the crew found themselves

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stranded on the icebergs off Antarctica. The *Endurance* hit ice before it reached Antarctica and in the face of almost certain death, the men continued the tea ritual. There are great stories of how Ernest Shackleton, the captain, brought tea to men on sledges as they were hunting seals to keep them alive during the winter. During their eighteen months on ice, you can imagine what the men must have felt seeing the supplies of tea dwindle. Shackleton's own account describes how they began to drink the stuffing from their boots like tea.

Tea was also there in World War II in England to sustain people. The historian A. A. Thompson wrote in 1942, "They talk about Hitler's secret weapon, but what about England's secret weapon—tea. That's what keeps us going and that's what's going to carry us through."<sup>6</sup> Tea was privy to war room conversations and a friend to the fighting men. The government, to safeguard tea, took control of all stocks at the war's outset. In 1940, after blockades prevented ships from getting through, tea was rationed to 2 ounces per person per week, but men in the armed forces received extra. Tea was such a morale booster that it was even sent in Red Cross parcels to British prisoners of war.

Tea was integral in the struggle for Indian independence. The tea estates that were a crucial part of manufacturing wealth to England had long been able to isolate the workforce and treat laborers as if they were indentured servants. The luxurious tea coming from Assam, India, continued to be an oppressive tool used by England to extract high profits and oppress workers. Mohandas Gandhi's independence

movement in India helped improve the rights of the tea workers and connect them to the National Congress. Tea became a tool Gandhi used against those who wanted to use the leaves to enslave people. He helped to organize workers and find alternatives to tea grown on huge estates, and he finally served tea to the British who would oppress the Indian people as a demonstration of his theology. In a beautiful scene in the movie *Gandhi*, his leadership team asks him not to serve tea. Through pouring the tea, he demonstrates the theology of ahimsa, the soul force of love that seeks to cause no pain and that can change all our hearts and minds. While wages and treatment of tea workers have vastly improved, it doesn't take much research to find stories of worker exploitation in every country with tea estates.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in addition to being a window into history, economics, exploration, and oppression, tea was central to the formation of rituals and rejuvenation in the three great philosophy religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The story of the development of the rituals of tea offers a glimpse into theology and a life of prayer. To this day, the beverage beckons us to join in the ritual of serving and drinking tea that teaches us about culture, history, and God. While history traces the harrowing path tea traveled and the oceans it crossed, the story I am drawn to first is that of the tea planters, pickers, and producers. The poverty experienced by most tea pickers throughout history is a bitter brew. Poverty preys on the most vulnerable members of society, in

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this case women and children, who historically have picked tea most. Their silent and unwritten story calls to people who savor tea and long for justice to better understand tea growing and production and to demand fairer practices for the world's tea harvesters.

Five years ago I stood in a field in the hills of Rwanda and had my first thoughts about wanting to understand the struggle for justice in the growing tea industry in the years since the 1994 genocide. Rwanda is known for importing tea to the States that is organic and fair trade. But when I first stood in the beautiful fields, which were being harvested by those who had survived the genocide, I couldn't help but compare the incredible beauty of the fields and the stories of the burden of poverty that some of the pickers shared. When you're in the fields you can't help but fall in love with the agrarian landscape outside of Kigali and feel a deep desire to understand more about what justice in growing and trading tea looks like. That was a long time ago, though, and I wasn't yet thinking that tea would become so prominent in my journey.

I met Nicholas Hitimana, the founding director of a cooperative called Ikirezi, and toured an organic farm where over four hundred women farmers partnered to grow lemongrass, germanium, and eucalyptus, to distill essential oils. They use the profits to build houses for one another and their surviving children. I was invited to sit in their kitchens, sip tea, and listen to their stories. There was a deep connection between the stories of the sexual violence they encountered and those I hear weekly from the women in the Thistle Farms

community. Their stories of survival were similarly heroic, and their ability to inspire hope in others was miraculous.

One woman told of crouching in waist-deep wet fields while fellow citizens were slaughtering her neighbors and family during the Rwandan genocide. Another woman's arm had been amputated in the genocide. Despite the loss and pain, she chose to forgive and kept farming. Others were more hesitant to talk, and some didn't want to speak of the genocide at all. When they talked about their families, they simply said "before 1994"—the year of the genocide—and spoke of the children they had then and now. Listening to what was spoken and left unspoken, I could feel a heavy weight pressing on my chest. I felt the guilt and grief we all bear from the knowledge that humanity is capable of such horror. Their stories followed me home and sit with me as I sip rich Rwandan black tea, reminded of the untold history of the people who cultivated it.

As I picture the women I met, I taste richness in this black tea that mirrors some of the richest soil on earth. I can see them standing in a field of four-foot-high bushes during twelve-hour shifts, wearing colorful headscarves, patterned dresses, and flip-flops. I wonder how they just keep picking and picking to fill baskets attached to their thin bodies. I recently asked Nicholas if he thought that the tea that he and I were drinking on his recent trip to Nashville could link us closer to the women of Rwanda. He explained the importance of direct trade in the business of social enterprise justice. Direct trade simply means that products move in a direct path from the producer to the consumer. The more



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direct the path, the higher the producer is valued in the economic equation. He was passionate about our ability, as consumers of essential oils and teas from Rwanda, to shift the winds of trade in the women's favor through wise purchasing practices.

My time in Rwanda reminds me that we are all connected. We are connected just like all the tea plants come from the same roots. The women who grow and pick the leaves are connected to the consumers. The women who will serve this tea at the Thistle Stop Café will forever be connected to the growers of this tea. If we can remind ourselves of the connection, we can build a world of fairer-traded tea.

I continue to look into the history of tea and I am struck by the patterns of human institutions that create poverty and yoke it to women. As I sipped my tea from a justice-minded farm in Rwanda, which is still in the minority of how most tea is plucked and processed, I could almost taste the hope that arises when work is done in a spirit of fairness and community.

Tea leaves from Rwanda that once might have held rich flavor lose their taste if we don't pay attention to the poverty of women who spend their lives in the hills of Kigali picking them. Our palates need to be cultivated to the point that we can savor the place of the tea producers in the value chain of trade and economics. When we thirst for justice tea as consumers, it will be there for us to drink. This means we need to purchase tea where farms are owned by participants, promote direct trade, and are organic companies that work to leverage economic market share and consumer

awareness. The cooperatives emerging in Rwanda are meeting these criteria through the shared values and responsibility meted out through governing boards that don't profit from increased trade. Rwandan tea is a good reminder that what we consume can either free or oppress. Hearing the quiet taste calling for justice in every cup is critical to the healing of the world. It's not enough to drink tea. We must know how it is grown.

Before I could even imagine exactly what the café would look like, I was already dreaming of the women we would hire to serve the tea. I hoped that customers could feel that tea grown with justice and dignity and served by survivors tastes richer. I hoped that strangers who walked into the café thirsty for much more than a cup of tea would be bonded by the common idea that we all have a story and that is what brings us together. I wanted to hold as sacred the stories of the hired women, the tea producers, and the customers. The café would support real economic development for the individual working women by training them as baristas and cashiers, offering full-time living wages, and providing a healing community where there is sufficient time and space to gain economic independence and make restitution with courts, family, and self. The scars of childhood trauma carried by the employed women are older than the oldest tea trees in the seven-story mountains of China. The women have a history of injustice and oppression as deep and rooted as the tea itself. A deep connection exists between the story of the women of Thistle Farms and the tea they serve.

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My prayer is that the women working in the café will heal as they serve. They will not “get over” the sexual violence they have experienced, but they will find roots that run deeper. They will keep serving tea until the past fades far enough into the background that a future comes into focus. This café will be part of their long journey of healing in the way of tea. They will see that the deep brutality they have borne on their backs was not in vain. Their suffering can be used to preach love as the most powerful force for social change. Because they survived and live in recovery, the beauty of their laughter comes from a place of gratitude and wholeness. Wisdom in living in recovery has changed them forever into courageous women whose dreams never die. Tea and Thistle Farms are bonded by their common history of survival, longevity, grace, and healing. The hope of women coming to the café whom I have not yet met is a reminder that tea will have a practical and economic side that will expand our reach. More than sweet thoughts, tea can become an economic powerhouse that transforms the history of communities. Tea can be a source of economic independence for women instead of a source of oppression. But like many good dreams, this one requires insight, forethought, and planning. We know we want the women in our community to make a living wage. We want to ensure everything we serve is as good for the earth as it is for the body. But we also need to establish the parameters of our economic bottom line and identify the underlying principles for managing this new venture.

It was time to establish specifically what those under-

lying principles would be so that they could be our guide for serving up a revolutionary tea while honoring the historical way of tea. Narrowing these principles down to four was one of my first goals to present to the committee that would help launch this new venture.

The first principle that needs to ground our community is hospitality. Hospitality is at the heart of the Benedictine rule, which helped form the spiritual practice of Magdalene and Thistle Farms.<sup>8</sup> The café will be welcoming to guests because we recognize the dignity of every person. Each visitor will be considered a member of the community of Thistle Farms during their visit. To live into this principle, we need to create a warm and kind place where people feel their spirits as well as their bodies fed and loved. This principle can be lived in simple details like fresh flowers on every table, a large guest book for input and comments, fragrant oils diffused throughout the café, enough staff and volunteers to bring the tea to each table and take a moment to listen to the journey of how guests made their way into this space.

*Chado*, which simply means “the way of tea” in Japanese, is the second principle guiding our café. Everything we do needs to reflect our desire to create harmony, cleanness, and tranquility. All the trappings of beauty are as temporal as the flowers, but in *chado*, we can offer guests a glimpse of love. The café is an outward and visible sign of the deeper meaning of healing. For folks to get the deeper meaning of what we are offering, they will need an open heart and a bit of reflection. We are taking an old universal practice

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and reminding people that the place of honor is the place of service for those who thirst.

Story is the third principle that will guide us. My hope is that the Thistle Stop Café will be a place to honor the individual stories of courage that give hope to the world. A story will be found in the tea (and coffee) we serve. The floor, the furniture, and the cabinets will all carry stories as well. Those who work in the café and those who wander in all have a story, and we want to make space for people to share their stories with one other without judgment in an atmosphere of acceptance and love. Sometimes the stories will be shared through chance meetings and long afternoon conversations. Other times we will make space to display a story found in music, writing, or poetry. And sometimes the story a visitor most needs to hear will be told through the artwork and sculptures found throughout the café. The Thistle Stop Café will be a place for humanity to bring and share their stories knowing they'll be heard.

The final essential principle is healing. Our tea will be all natural and served with respect for the gifts of creation that help our bodies, minds, and spirits. Community is a powerful agent of healing. By opening the doors, we are creating a space for the servers, the guests who come in, and the people who read about this café to be healed from old wounds and cynicism about this world.

From a simple cup of Rwandan black tea, the underlying principles of our new social enterprise float to the surface like leaves in a gentle tide. We will be hospitable, following *chado*, listening to the stories as we begin to heal. We will

serve up justice tea that may free more women. That is how to dream a cup of tea. We take in the rich history, see the steam like the mist of Rwandan mountains, and as the warm liquid fills the body, we let our hearts turn to flesh. In that vulnerable moment, we can believe that together we can live in a more loving world.

But I am also grateful that while I dwell in this cup of tea from Rwanda and dream, no one can read my private thoughts like leaves in the bottom of a cup. I am sure that my private worries, doubts, and longings are written on my brow, but they remain mine. Tea can carry the dreams, and it can hold my thoughts that rise without permission like steam from the deep place of longing. It is good that tea can be a confessor throughout this journey. It can hold my thoughts and let them steep as I fantasize about how good my life would be in the hills of Rwanda alongside the pioneers working with women to bring justice and tea together. A friend and I would get up early and brew a pot of tea from a large tin pan over an open fire. The misty hills would sit with us like a warm blanket. We would go out and start a quiet revolution while building community and living simply, as the world loved us. Tea can take our fantasies without judgment, and it's not like taking a good long look in the mirror. In a cup of tea you can be any age and pull memories off the shelf and dream of a better you. It is freedom to dream a cup and then be refreshed enough to empty out the leaves and get back to work.