



# **Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea**

*Jeff Koehler*

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Darjeeling's tea bushes run across a mythical landscape steeped with the religious, the sacred, and the picturesque. Planted at high elevation in the heart of the Eastern Himalayas, in an area of northern India bound by Nepal to the west, Bhutan to the east, and Sikkim to the north, the linear rows of brilliant green, waist-high shrubs that coat the steep slopes and valleys around this Victorian "hill town" produce only a fraction of the world's tea, and less than one percent of India's total. Yet the tea from that limited crop, with its characteristic bright, amber-colored brew and muscatel flavors--delicate and flowery, hinting of apricots and peaches--is generally considered the best in the world.

This is the story of how Darjeeling tea began, was key to the largest tea industry on the globe under Imperial British rule, and came to produce the highest-quality tea leaves anywhere in the world. It is a story rich in history, intrigue and empire, full of adventurers and unlikely successes in culture, mythology and religions, ecology and terroir, all set with a backdrop of the looming Himalayas and drenching monsoons. The story is ripe with the imprint of the Raj as well as the contemporary clout of "voodoo farmers" getting world record prices for their fine teas--and all of it beginning with one of the most audacious acts of corporate smuggling in history.

But it is also the story of how the industry spiraled into decline by the end of the twentieth century, and how this edenic spot in the high Himalayas seethes with union unrest and a violent independence struggle. It is also a front-line fight against the devastating effects of climate change and decades of harming farming practices, a fight that is being fought in some tea gardens--and, astonishingly, won--using radical methods.

Jeff Koehler has written a fascinating chronicle of India and its most sought-after tea. Blending history, politics, and reportage together, along with a collection of recipes that tea-drinkers will love, *Darjeeling* is an indispensable volume for fans of micro-history and tea fanatics.

## **Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea** **Details**

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# From Reader Review Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea for online ebook

## Anupriya says

Every time I read this book, I wanted to brew myself a cup of Darjeeling tea. Lucky me, I have a stock of Darjeeling tea leaves at hand.

The love for Darjeeling tea, a thing I inherit from my dad, is what swayed me to pick this book. And what a great find this was. It transports you as you read it, to the misty green hills of Darjeeling. I could smell the tea as the author described its floral, muscatel fragrance.

It was a delight to read about the history of Darjeeling tea, it's a relatively younger industry than I would have imagined.

I loved reading about the sustainable and organic farming method employed by these tea plantations, and knowing about it fills me with reverence for the plantations. It is something they do not for money, the yield in fact goes down on going organic, but out of respect for the land and the life around them.

Darjeeling is now a must-visit place for me and I plan on coming back with kilos of their premium tea.

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## Eduardo says

Ahora soy más fan del té.

Siempre me ha gustado y hace algunos años llegué a beber Darjeeling de Margaret Hope tea state. Después de viajar a China y aprender un poco de los usos y costumbres del té estoy muy ansioso por que llegue el viaje a Darjeeling.

Este libro cuenta cómo casi por accidente Darjeeling se volvió la región más famosa y apreciada en producción de té.

Además de darte una sinopsis histórica también es muy descriptivo del estado actual de la región.

Una delicia leerlo.

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## Lisa says

The author offers a thorough review of the Darjeeling tea history and industry. It is a compilation of agriculture, history, processing, tasting notes, economics, branding and marketing, and labor relations. The structure is very creative with history following the growing cycle and seasons. The descriptions are thorough and clear without flowery over the top adjectives. The book has lots of details but they don't detract from the big picture.

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## Hester says

I finished this book while I was actually in Darjeeling. Personally, I found it hard to find good travel literature on the region. This book gives a great overview of the area, and even gives some nice tips, like recommending eating the chicken cutlets at the Bagdogra airport (good advice). The book, though, is not meant as a guidebook. It is more dreamy--the kind of book you read to learn about a beautiful, exotic place half a world away. Recommended.

I had a couple small quibbles:

1. I would have liked to learn more about the tea pluckers and their families.
2. I would have liked to learn more about the region as a whole. In some ways, it read like a biography of Rajah Bannerjee and a history of the Makaibari tea estate. That is not a slur--Rajah Bannerjee is utterly fascinating. Likable, too. I was fortunate enough to meet him and I would have liked to read about some other people, too. The author's description of him, by the way, is accurate. I just realized I gave everyone else a good reason to read the book. It will not disappoint.
3. I wish he had written about the current road improvement projects. He wrote about lots about local projects, and I wish I could have put them in context. I think I saw seven major projects while there, and I was on a great new road, too. I wonder what changed recently.
4. I don't think he mentioned the giant squirrels! Three foot long squirrels!

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### **Stephanie Smith says**

This was an excellent book about an arguably obscure topic. There are a lot of books out there about the general history of tea, but none dealing exclusively with Darjeeling. I was expecting the narrative to be very similar (if not identical) to overviews of the history of tea I've read in the past. This was not the case. At the beginning there is a bit of a general history given to provide context, but the majority of the book contains information I had never come across before (I have read at least 3 books on the history of tea). It gets a bit slow around the middle but it is worth it to push through. There are also some relatively simple yet exciting recipes included.

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### **Rachel says**

I chose Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea because as we all know, I love learning about all things Indian. Also, they drink this tea on Downton Abbey and I was curious about how an Indian tea came to be popular in England – if the characters on that show drink it, it must be good tea!

The history of the tea is fascinating. It arrived in India in a dramatic fashion – being stolen from China. Today the tea is grown in tea gardens, which are really huge plantations. The relationship of the tea garden workers to the owners is a totally different arrangement from anything I've ever heard of before. This book also touches on the state of Darjeeling tea today. The regulation process needs some work – there is a lot of

fake Darjeeling tea out there.

Koehler goes into a lot of detail about the physical properties of the tea and how it's grown and harvested. This part didn't interest me nearly as much as the history aspect of the book but that's probably because I'm not much of a tea drinker myself. Incidentally, I tried some Darjeeling tea for the first time after finishing this book and I thought it was really good. I don't care much for regular black tea so I think there must truly be something special about it.

I listened to the audiobook version of this book. The narrator had a mellow voice with just a touch of an Indian accent that made it a pleasure to listen too. The only thing I didn't like was that he used a full-on Indian accent when reading a quote from an Indian person. It seemed odd to do that for a non-fiction book.

I really enjoyed learning about a tiny subset of Indian culture that I knew nothing about before. I think tea drinkers of all sorts will enjoy it as well.

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### **Luciana Vichino says**

Interesting facts but poor text and mostly written as an informative report on the industry. Despite the not so pleasant reading I have learned and got curious to know Darjeeling.

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### **Tariq Mahmood says**

I love tea, always have and always will. And so I picked this book. Not only did I get an absolute idea of the production of tea, but also became enamoured with the the passionate producers of Darjeeling tea, arguably the best tea in the world. The book is more than tea though, it is a book about Darjeeling the city. A city created by the British colonisers to escape the hot plains of India, and to produce tea. Tea is definitely the gift of the English to the world.

I also loved the highly romanised narrative especially of the natural scenes depicted in the book. I did struggle with the long passages explaining the business models though. All in all, the book was a very enjoyable experience.

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### **Bookworm says**

Meh. Tea is a major drink of choice for me and I enjoy reading up on it. I was intrigued by this book cover that says Darjeeling is the world's greatest tea. I would need more information to see what supports this premise.

Author Koehler takes us through the origins of Darjeeling and tea, from the discovery of tea, how tea is harvested, the issues facing the industry, the history and the role tea has played in it and more. Some of it is quite fascinating: from the role tea played in the Opium Wars to how tea is used in trade between India and Russia, Iran, etc. This was probably the most interesting parts of the book for me as I never quite realized \*how\* important a commodity tea has been.

But otherwise, the book is an incredible mishmash. Bouncing between the history to how tea is harvested to how it can be prepared, etc. I found the book was very uneven. I'm genuinely shocked at the number of reviews that found the author's writing "engaging". It's clear the author is very passionate about the topic, but that did not translate well to the page.

And as other reviewers note, the book is written from a Western POV. The author says "Darjeeling's tea story is romantic." on page 7 of my hardcover copy. Romantic...for whom? The book flap itself calls tea/the tea industry in India came to symbolize British imperial rule. Along with the role it played in the Opium Wars, I just couldn't agree. Sometimes the author goes off and waxes poetic about his subject and it can get a bit wearing.

Still, there were definitely parts of the book that were interesting and I did learn more. But I am surprised the book is rated so highly. I got it as a bargain book but recommend the library or skipping it instead.

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### **Randal White says**

An extremely thorough coverage of all things tea, with a strong concentration on Darjeeling tea. What it is, where it comes from, how it is prepared, why it is different than other tea. A history of tea, India and the British rule of India. The effect of terroir on tea, the status of the tea industry and the tea-growing regions of today. What the future may hold for the Darjeeling area, and why. You will come away with a new found appreciation of your morning tea!

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### **Nichole says**

Gosh. I picked up this book because I had the fortune to go to Darjeeling during my study abroad in India (and I just really love tea).

This was just a delight to read. It gives you so much knowledge and glimpses into the process, history, politics, and heart of Darjeeling tea. It really helps put into perspective what goes into the little packets of tea I took away from Darjeeling over a year ago.

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### **Jordan Stivers says**

Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea was an absolutely fabulous read. So often with food history books, the writer gets so tied up in the cold information and forgets to make the reader feel attachment to the subject. Koehler did not do that here. He seamlessly blends the information about the tea itself and the history surrounding it with beautiful imagery and powerful emotive writing. As the reader, you truly experience the ups and downs of being involved with Darjeeling: you revel in a successful selling flush and you are devastated by a particularly bad monsoon season.

It is a really romantic story, one that starts with questionable characters and the stealing of Chinese secrets. Today, the story is of these struggling gardens with a beautiful, unique product made by the old ways in this special area that also hosts all these perilous factors of terrible weather, inaccessibility, unstable politics, and a waning workforce. Talk about an uphill climb!

The delicacy of Darjeeling combined with the urgency many of the gardens face to remain open created great tension throughout the book. It really is a product that cannot be made anywhere else, a handicraft of centuries. I loved the description of the daily workings of the gardens. It's stunning how hard they all work every day for mere pounds of the tea. The opening section (a tea auction that fetches a record price for Darjeeling) was particularly exhilarating.

I absolutely LOVED the beginning sections for each part that gave the reader a 'taste' of that season's flush. It is now a life goal of mine to try Darjeeling autumn flush tea (p.167-9) as that part was my favorite of the whole book. Koehler just does such a wonderful job of controlling the flow of the book, jumping from the big perspective of the historical sweep down to the moment-in-time perspective of individual garden managers and a single cup of tea.

At the end of the book is a list of recipes as well. What foodie does not love that! I already am planning to try three recipes: the masala omelet, Glenburn's chicken and fresh mint hamper sandwiches, and the specked chicken cutlets. Yum! A big thank-you to Koehler for a lovely read that now has a treasured place on my bookshelf!

Favorite quotation: "Fermentation is simply a process of death and decay. We are afraid of death—but love the flavor of it." (p. 84)

\*Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this book through the GoodReads First Reads program. I want to thank Bloomsbury Publishing for the copy and the opportunity to read it.

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## **Patty says**

A book covering pretty much everything you could want to know regarding tea, and specifically that grown in the Darjeeling region of India (which is the most expensive and most highly regarded black tea). Topics include the original discovery/invention of tea, the importation of tea plants from China to India during and after the Opium Wars, the establishment of tea plantations in Darjeeling, how tea is grown and processed and evaluated and sold today, how to distinguish between the different "flushes" of Darjeeling tea, and the future of tea (with problems such as climate change, competition from tea grown in Africa, and the decision to switch to new styles of farming like organic or biodynamic). I liked the modern-day sections better, although that might be simply because I already knew most of the history – and if you're at all familiar with, say, the Opium Wars, a short chapter summarizing the entire complex situation isn't going to add anything new. I did catch a few small errors in the history sections (for instance, Koehler claims that spices were so popular in medieval Europe because they were used "to cover the taste of spoiling meats", which is not a thing that happened, no matter how many people repeat the myth), but nothing major. He even includes tea recipes at the end of the book! They range from ones that include tea in the cooking process (such as tea-smoked chicken) to ones that are just good to eat with tea (like scones and clotted cream).

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## **Cora Tea Party Princess says**

**5 Words: Tea, history, India, Britain, Darjeeling.**

I don't read a lot of non-fiction, but when I do I wish it was like this.



I loved the mix of historical fact and modern anecdote, the rich descriptions of each place and person mentioned. And I loved learning more about my favourite drink.

*I won a copy of this from Bloomsbury's Facebook page.*

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## **Eustacia Tan says**

Since I spent last year doing quite a bit of general reading about tea, I thought I'd take it a bit more in-depth this year. That means taking both a wider look at the issues surrounding tea (hopefully there's a contemporary book or blog I can read!) and going in depth into the history of teas. Darjeeling focuses on one specific tea, so it's exactly what I'm looking for.

Subtitled "The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea" (I suspect many in China might dispute the title), the book is divided into 4 sections, for the four flushes. Each section starts with a description of the tea made from that flush, and then goes into either the history or present of the tea. The first flush starts with a general history of tea and then moves into a history of the region. The second flush goes into detail about Darjeeling, how the area was developed and how the tea is made today. The third flush, Monsoon Flush, looks at the history of the area and how that has impacted the plantations, as well as the crises faced by the farms today. Finally, the fourth flush, the Autumn Flush, covers the modern Darjeeling industry, including the question of organic and biodynamic farming, tourism, and even co-op farms. The book ends with a collection of recipes, and I have to admit I only glanced through that.

This book was fascinating and I learnt a lot from it. As it turns out, Darjeeling was first grown by Dr. Archibald Campbell, a Scottish civil servant, in 1841 "with stock that came from the nurseries in the western Himalayan foothills. The trees came to bear in the second half of that decade, and the Company inspector reported in 1853 that both Chinese and Assam varieties were doing well in Campbell's garden." The tea was actually a happy accident, as the British discovered that the Chinese plants smuggled over thrived in the mountainous climate of Darjeeling.

And it is this climate that affects the taste – that's why Darjeeling was awarded Geographical Indication status by the WTO in 2004, and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) by the European Commission in October 2011. According to the book, the combination of sunshine for no more than 5-6 hours a day for 180 days, mists and clouds as well as enough water and just enough sun gives it its unique flavour, while proximity to the snow-covered Himalayas "gives a 'crisping effect' to flavour". Plus, the "human touch in every step" makes it unique.

I mentioned four flushes just now. They are:

- First flush (late Feb to Mid April): This is a spring tea, and the steeped liquor is pale gold, with grassy and floral notes.
- Second flush (May to June): This tea is fuller but still relaxed, less grassy flavours, muscatel flavour more pronounced. Its colour is a "bright, deep amber".
- Monsoon flush (July to September): The tea becomes even redder, while the heavy rain causes the prices to drop. This season's teas are mostly sold as blends. There are also some green teas made from this flush, although other estates do set aside teas from 'better' flushes to make green tea as well.
- Autumn Flush (October into November): the tea liquor "ruddy copper, bright auburn, even burgundy"

while the flavour is more robust and round with “mellowed hints of musky spice and smoke”. The tea from this flush is considered to have the most complex flavours, while its prices are not as high as the first and second flushes, thanks to the outside world being busy with Christmas.

I also learnt that there are other, non-black, Darjeeling teas: Apart from the green teas made during the monsoon season, there are also white teas (e.g. Silver Tips Imperial from Makaibari), and oolong.

Sadly, Darjeeling tea faces challenges such as

- Climate change, which results in the rain comes at the wrong time and reducing the harvest;
- High worker absenteeism, which in some gardens go as high as 50% while others are 25-30%. A large factor for this is the fact that tea plucking isn't seen as a desirable job, even by families who have always been tea pluckers;
- Severe political instability because West Bengal would like to be independent and bandh – shutdowns- are not uncommon. This also impacts Darjeeling teas.
- Counterfeiting from teas grown outside of Darjeeling. This is somewhat countered by Darjeeling's PGI status, but farms grown from regions near Darjeeling are becoming competitive. Plus, the shutdowns make alternatives to Darjeeling appealing to buyers who want a steady supply of tea that tastes like Darjeeling.

I would recommend this book to anyone who's looking into studying more about Darjeeling tea. This book goes beyond the taste and history of Darjeeling, covering the challenges it faces and the initiatives it's undertaking as well. There are also lots of stories about the tea gardens of Darjeeling, which are sure to appeal to any tea lover.

This review was first posted at Eustea Reads

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