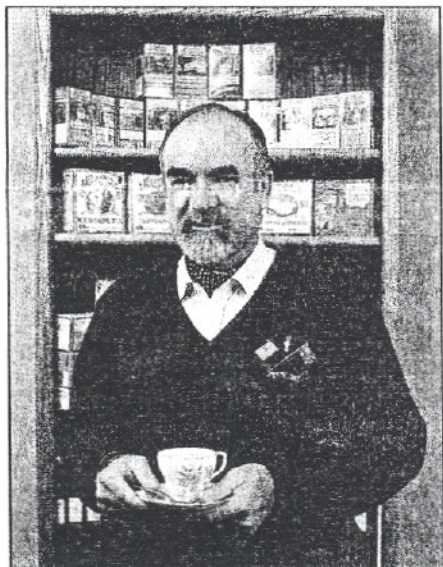


Portrait of a master tea taster



EUGENE TANNER / Daily Camera

A GOOD TASTE: Barry Cooper is the tea taster and buyer for Celestial Seasonings.

By WENDY WORRALL
For the Camera

Barry Cooper is everyone's idea of the quintessential Englishman. Distinguished and genteel, Cooper speaks with a rich British accent and favors English breakfast tea — about seven cups per day.

On the desk in his office is a fine porcelain tea set, well-used. The walls are adorned with African artifacts, including a Maasai shield from Kenya, where he grew up on a family farm surrounded by tea estates. As a boy, Cooper captained the school cricket team and played rugby; as a young man, he embarked upon that most British of career paths: tea-tasting.

Nearly 30 years in the tea industry has led Cooper to his present positions as a member of the American Tea Board and vice president of research and development at Celestial Seasonings. Long known for its herb teas, Celestial made its foray into the highly competitive black tea business, Cooper's specialty, in 1986.

Cooper interviewed for a job as a taster with Lipton in London in 1963, pursuing a job description that required simply "an ability to live overseas and get on with a multitude of cultures." He began a rigorous two-year training program centered on the London Auction, a major trade center for teas from around the world.

As a trainee he was paid the equivalent of \$18 a week, a meager wage which quickly culled out those not deeply devoted to the task, he says.

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Cooper searches for finest teas

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Cooper, however, was fascinated, developing "an abiding affection and curiosity for all the little nuances of taste."

As an apprentice, he consumed "trays and trays" of tea each day, sipping 300 to 400 cups under the tutelage of a master taster who'd been in the business 25 to 40 years. He learned taste terminologies, compared thickness of body and discerned flavor characteristics, in much the same way a sophisticated wine taster would.

Cooper's taste buds were so sensitive that he was eventually able to tell which tea had grown during the monsoon, and which was harvested from the sunny side of the mountain.

After graduation he was employed by Lipton in Kenya and Uganda where he learned tea buying, trading and blending. He later brought these skills to the United States when he transferred to Lipton's Flemington, N.J., plant in 1971. He remained there, in many senior roles, until joining Celestial in 1988.

As the company's black tea expert, Cooper knows what it will take to ensure success in this relatively new venture: "We have to have the finest tea out there. We can't gain market share and establish ourselves if we're 'as good as' — we've got to be better."

Celestial's limited size in the market makes that possible, says Cooper. The company buys small enough quantities to be extremely selective.

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The glowing letters the company receives from British consumers are testimony to the high quality of its black teas, Cooper says.

Cooper's expertise is important in assuring that kind of quality. Each year he spends six to eight weeks visiting tea gardens and manufacturers in India, Ceylon and Thailand.

"I need to know exactly what is going on with the quality, supply and political arenas in each of the producing countries," he explains. That means monitoring how congested ports are, watching labor relations, being aware of any new taxes which might be slapped on exports, and finding out what expected yields are for the coming year. The exchange of such information throughout the tea traders' network is critically important, says Cooper.

While millions of tons of tea are auctioned each week in Calcutta, Mombassa and Jakarta,

Cooper would argue that the very best comes from a small plantation in India surrounded by a Bengal tiger preserve. Here, on a farm devoted exclusively to producing for Celestial, the company grows organic black tea, the first of its kind to appear in the U.S. market.

Unlike tea "forced" to grow rapidly through the use of fertilizers on 500-acre plantations, organic tea is allowed to take its time. No pesticides or herbicides are used, and a rigorous inspection process is required in order to certify the tea as "organically grown."

The tea leaves become very full and succulent, says Cooper, yielding a drink with "no thinness, hardness or edge. There's a wonderful, smooth character to the tea."

While the tea bushes' lower yield means a higher price tag for organic tea, Cooper thinks it's well worth it: "The quality is so much better — the body, the mellowness — it's incredibly unique."

Even his wife, a Texan iced-tea lover, is a convert. She puts four tea bags into a quart of cold water, lets it brew three to four hours in the refrigerator, then removes and squeezes the bags.

"A sweetness comes through" in the organic iced tea, Cooper says. But like a good Englishman, he usually drinks his hot. (See story below for Barry Cooper's expert guidelines on brewing that perfect cup of tea.)