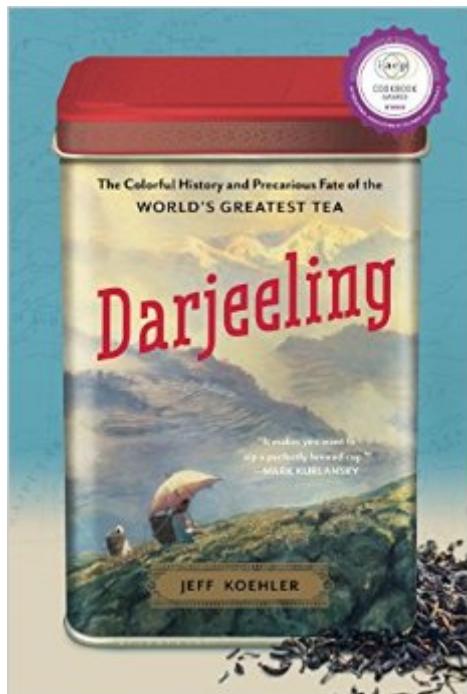


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Darjeeling: The Colorful History And Precarious Fate Of The World's Greatest Tea



Synopsis

Darjeeling's tea bushes run across a mythical Indian landscape steeped in the religious, the sacred, and the picturesque. Planted among eighty-seven tea estates at high elevation in the heart of the eastern Himalayas, the linear rows of brilliant green waist-high shrubs that coat the steep slopes and valleys produce less than 1 percent of India's tea. Yet with its bright color and muscatel flavor, Darjeeling is generally considered the finest tea in the world. Built from scratch, India's tea industry grew to be the largest on the globe and came to symbolize British imperial rule in India. The jewel of its production was, and remains, Darjeeling, and its story is rich in people, intrigue, and terroir. It includes Robert Fortune, whose mid-nineteenth-century smuggling of tea plants and expertise from China brought the British East India Company the quality tea it sought; the charismatic and controversial Rajah Banerjee, whose family owned the iconic Makaibari plantation for 150 years; the tea pluckers who underpin the industry; and the lone auctioneer who bangs down his hammer oversees the sale more than half of Darjeeling's entire crop. But it is also the story of how this Edenic spot in the Himalayan foothills is beset by labor and political unrest and alarming climate change that threaten its future. With passion and perception, Koehler illuminates a historic and arcane world, such that an ordinary tea bag and the cup enjoyed by tens of millions each day take on entirely new meanings.

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Customer Reviews

Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the Worldâ™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.

Normally, it's animals that tie a farmer to the land. You can't leave for a day. Vegetables and fruit are far less demanding on an hourly basis. Unless you're taking about tea, where the finest has its own universe of rules. The greatest teas come from Darjeeling, a quarter of the way up the Himalayas. They are harvested daily (every bush must be plucked at least weekly, March through November). The harvests are different, according to the cull, the weather, the time of year, the humidity and even the phase of the moon. They must be processed immediately, and stopping a process is a minute to minute judgment based on smell and feel. Great tea is as labor intensive as it gets. The pay is lousy, and the life is isolated. And yet, once given the opportunity to be a planter in Darjeeling, people tend to stay for life. Tea is naturally a tree, and will grow into one unless constantly trimmed and plucked (harvested) to keep it low enough for workers. Imagine hundreds of acres of bonsais, and you can imagine all the attention needed to keep everything producing daily. All tea comes from one plant. It's the way the planters process the leaves that makes tea white or green or black, sweet or smoky, heavy or light. These are the ingredients Jeff Koehler stirs into Darjeeling, an endlessly entrancing journey from smuggled seeds to world record auctions. The topography is unforgiving, the climate(s) fearsome, and the workers horrendously underpaid in a feudal system set up by the British. That anything comes of it at all is a mystery. Yet the brand is so

powerful, five times as much Darjeeling tea is sold as can be produced. For some reason, plantations acquired the name tea garden, even though the average $\text{garden} \cdot$ is 553 acres and produces 220,000 pounds of tea.

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