

Review: 'Darjeeling' by Jeff Koehler

By **Scott Porch**

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The Indian subcontinent is a downward-pointing triangle. In the upper, right-hand corner — at the foot of the snow-peaked Himalayas and virtually inaccessible for most of human history — sits a tiny, mountainous region bordered by Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. There, in a process largely unchanged in the last 150 years, a handful of estates produce the most delicate, most refined and most expensive tea in the world. The region and its tea are known simply as Darjeeling.

The estates, with Anglicized names like Glenburn and Castleton, have been producing Darjeeling tea since the days of the Raj, the British Empire's occupation of India from mid-19th century until Indian independence in 1947. Tea had long been China's domain, but the British — who by the 1840s had a taste for both tea and dominion — sent a Scottish botanist named Robert Fortune on a dangerous and covert operation into mainland China to smuggle out the tools to launch a new tea region in British India.

Fortune shaved his head, threw on Chinese robes and "became his alter ego, Sing Wa, a respected business man from some country 'beyond the Great Wall' that justified his height and pale skin, heavy accent, and inability to speak the local dialects, and perhaps the reason he lacked a certain intrinsic fluency with chopsticks," author Jeff Koehler writes in "Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea."

The operation was a success. Fortune transplanted hundreds of tea bushes into glass terrariums and shipped them — along with eight Chinese tea makers who would have been flogged and tortured had they been caught — 450 miles to a former Mughal garden in Saharanpur along the Indian foothills of the Himalayas. The tea bushes took to their new environs and spread across northern India. By the end of the 19th century, Britain was importing less than half its tea from China.

In those early chapters, Koehler shakes little of the dust from the dry academic histories and even dryer 19th-century archival records. When he writes about the tea itself, though — how the pickers skillfully pluck the leaves and toss them into a basket, how the tea smells as it's being dried, the daily taste tests at each estate — his prose is both sensory and balletic.

About one of the estate's leading tea-tasters, Koehler writes: "He loudly slurps a generous mouthful of liquid off the spoon. Holding it for a moment, he takes two or three quick and sharp aerating sucks that flood the (tea) around the palate and send it up into the olfactory organ in the nose in the manner of an animated wine taster. The tip of the tongue gauges sweetnesses and saltiness, the middle tartness, the back bitterness, and the back edges sourness. But he is also *feeling* the tea: the inside of the gums, cheeks, and the back of the tongue catch the astringency or pungency by sensation rather than taste."

Darjeeling tea is harvested and processed nine months a year in four flushes, or seasons, that vary according to the amount of rain. Darjeeling tea producers perform every step of the process on-site. In the span of a single day, tea leaves are plucked, withered, rolled, fermented, dried, packaged and shipped to a warehouse. The next morning, the process begins again.

In the swelter of an Indian summer, mountainous Darjeeling is much cooler. During the Raj, the leadership of the

regional government in Calcutta 400 miles to the south would move to Darjeeling for the summer — a sort of Himalayan Kennebunkport — and many Indian aristocrats still maintain summer homes there.

Koehler, who has written books about Spanish, Moroccan and Mediterranean culinary cultures, includes numerous recipes in the back of "Darjeeling" for many of the local dishes he discusses in the book — from aloo dum, a breakfast dish of potatoes, garlic and fresh ginger that he adapted from the family cook at the Goomtee Tea Estate, to the fried pakoras stuffed with onions and green chilies that are served with afternoon tea.

In one memorable scene, Koehler asks a student at St. Paul's boarding school in Darjeeling why he is carrying an umbrella during the dry season, and the student answers, "Tradition, sir!" Owing in part to its adherence to century-old production methods, its reputation for supplying the world's most sought-after teas and in part to its remote locale and isolated culture, Darjeeling is perhaps the last bastion of the British empire.

Scott Porch is writing a book about social upheaval in the 1960s and '70s.

"Darjeeling"

By Jeff Koehler, Bloomsbury, 293 pages, \$27

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