

Review of:

Tasting Qualities: The Past and Future of Tea

Sarah Besky. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. Pp. 236, index, bibliography.

Review by Susan Eleuterio

In this interesting and sometimes challenging book, Sarah Besky, an assistant Professor of Anthropology and International and Public Affairs at Brown University, documents her ethnographic exploration of *quality* in terms of tea, or, as she states: “What makes a good cup of tea?” (1) with the focus on “what is good?” Her work led me to examine the tea boxes and bags in my cupboard and to think—I am embarrassed to admit—for the first time in decades as a tea drinker, about the people who grow, harvest, judge, package, and sell tea.

I suspect, like many Americans, I was much more aware of the political, environmental, and cultural practices connected with coffee production; taught to at least wonder about the quality and origins of coffee by corporations such as Starbucks and by commercials dating back to my childhood in the 1950s. Other than learning about the Boston Tea Party during the American revolution, I never thought to think much about the production of tea.

Besky notes that she began with trying: “to understand how international agricultural certifications like organic, fair trade, biodynamic, and Rainforest Alliance affected the way that tea was valued,” (3) in Kolkata, India. Discovering that these factors weren’t meaningfully impactful, she set about to observe the tasting and auctioning practices for a variety of teas. Along the way, she witnessed the computerization of tea auctions beginning in 2008. She divides the results of her ethnographic work into chapters on the production and science of quality, tasting, valuing, auctioning, selling, marketing, and blending tea, in particular the cheap black CTC (Cut-tear-curl) tea favored in India for *chai*. In her final chapter, she examines the enduring nature of both the search for quality and India’s tea plantations, which began under British rule.

Referred to in this text as *Tea 2030*, I discovered several of the teas in my cupboard (Photo 1) advertised their producers’ membership in the Ethical Tea Partnership <https://www.ethicalteapartnership.org/mission/> (accessed February 7, 2022) whose mission is to achieve its “vision of a thriving, socially just and environmentally sustainable tea sector through its 50 members.” Besky has also written *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair Trade Tea Plantations in India*, which she references at times in terms of the people who grow and harvest tea. In further examining tea in my kitchen, I realized that Bigelow makes an attempt at personal connection by naming the person, “Judy M,” who packed the tea, along with encouragement to recycle. (Photo 2)

As a folklorist, I was most interested in what Besky describes as the “embodied” (and as she notes, gendered) practices connected with tea production; the frequently female (and essentially indentured) workers who grow and pick the tea, the male tasters who value the tea, and the (primarily) men who, until just a decade ago, brokered and bought the tea at outcry auctions in person. Using both archival research and field work, she narrates the sometimes discouraging but also fascinating history of tea production in India beginning

during England's domination during the height of colonial power and ending with the contemporary digital revolution, which is still ongoing. Through this, she explores the changes over time to how tea is grown and sold in India.

I began reading this book expecting a comfortable tale. Besky herself lures the reader in her introduction with the visuals of a nice cup of tea," but quickly dives into her thesis that the "dependable and standardized" expectations of tea drinkers (and consumers) are the result of a "hidden, complex process that traverses the history of European colonialism, postcolonial economic debates, and the development of modern industrial food science" (1-2). She notes that the concept of quality in food and beverage production (and parenthetically adds that "quality matters in a variety of contexts ") depends on standardization, power relations, markets, and "materials as more than passive objects," pointing out that "substances like tea (and sugar and milk , for that matter) play an active role in their own qualification" in terms of such physical concepts of bitterness, sweetness, and what is considered to taste "good," using artisanal cheese and pork as examples (10-12).

In a surprisingly compact volume, Besky reviews decades of history, including experimental, scientific, economic, and agricultural research and changes in all aspects of the tea industry in India. Beginning with the practices of the East India Company, which held its first auction sale in Calcutta in 1861 (5), she thoughtfully examines the role of Indian tea plantations, stating "the plantation has endured well beyond its colonial origins in large part because quality has also endured as a subject of experimentation" (183). Her description of "sick" plantations, where workers have literally starved, makes one shudder to think about the true costs of our desire for a "good cup of tea." At the same time, her conclusion that "experiments with quality do not always lead to destruction, but they do not easily lead to liberation either," (183) sums up the tricky nature of change in food and beverage production. This is not a comforting book, but it provides a significant contribution to not only the issue of quality in terms of tea but a thorough documentation of how tea has been grown, processed, sold and packaged in India and for much of the world market.



Photo 1: *Ethical Tea Partnership Caption on Bigelow Tea Box. February 2022. Photo by Susan Eleuterio*



Photo 2: *"Packed With Pride by Judy M." Bigelow Tea Box. February 2022. Photo by Susan Eleuterio*