

THE HONEYLEAF TEA COMPANION



*Notes from the blending station at Honeyleaf Tea Room, Maplewick
by Lila Hartwell, as told to Clara Finch*

A NOTE FROM THE BLENDING STATION



People sometimes ask me, at the counter, what the secret is. They mean the secret to tea, and they ask it a little sheepishly, as though good tea were a locked room and the rest of us have been standing outside it. Here is the whole of the secret, and it fits on one page: fresh water, honest measurement, the right temperature, and enough respect for the leaf to give it your attention for three minutes. That's it. Everything else in this companion is only that one idea wearing different hats.

What follows are the blends we're known for, the rules I actually follow, and the pairings I find myself recommending across the counter most often. Put the kettle on before you read. It reads better that way.

THE HONEYLEAF BLENDS



HONEYLEAF GREY



Our signature, and the tea most people mean when they say they've heard about us. An Earl Grey built on a Ceylon base, with Calabrian bergamot folded in rather than sitting on top, a warmth of vanilla underneath, and a scatter of blue cornflower that does very little for the flavour and a great deal for the soul. Rounded, bright, quietly luxurious. It took years to get right, and it tastes like it knows that.

To approximate at home: Start with the best plain Ceylon Earl Grey you can find, one that smells of citrus rather than soap. Add the smallest shaving of vanilla pod to the caddy, not the pot, and let it live there a week. A pinch of dried cornflower petals, for the look of weather in the jar. Brew at 95 degrees for three minutes and taste before you add anything at all.

THE HOUSE BLEND



The everyday pot, and proud of it. Ceylon-forward, with notes of apricot and honey, bright without being sharp. This is the tea for the second cup, the long conversation, the crossword. It doesn't demand your attention. It keeps you company while your attention is elsewhere, which is a harder job and an underrated one.

To approximate at home: A good single-estate Ceylon does most of the work. Add one piece of dried apricot to the caddy for a fortnight and take it out before it gets ideas. Sweeten the cup, if you sweeten, with honey rather than sugar, and only a little.

SECOND STEEP



Named for second chances, and drunk mostly in cold weather and changed circumstances. A black blend with a gentle smokiness at the very back, like a fireplace two rooms away. It is the tea I reach for at the end of the longest days, and the one our regulars ask for by name when the clocks go back.

To approximate at home: Blend four parts good Ceylon with one part lapsang souchong, no more. The smoke should be a rumour. If anyone at the table can name the lapsang, reduce it.

HOW TO MAKE A PROPER POT



1. Start with fresh, cold water every time. Water that has been boiled twice has given its best to somebody else.
2. Warm the pot. Swirl a splash of hot water round it and tip it away. A cold pot steals the first minute from the leaf, and the first minute is the generous one.
3. Measure honestly. One rounded teaspoon of leaf per person, and one for the pot if the pot is large or the day is hard.
4. Give the leaves room. Tea unfurls. A cramped infuser makes a cramped cup. If you can, let the leaf swim free and pour through a strainer.
5. Time it. Do not guess, and do not wander off. Three minutes is a real number, and the difference between three and seven is the difference between a cup of tea and a lesson.
6. Pour it all. Tea left standing on the leaf keeps steeping and turns on you. Decant into a second warmed pot if the table is settling in.

7. Steep good leaves twice. Many teas, oolongs especially, give a second pot that is softer and rounder than the first. In this house we think rather highly of second chances.

BREWING, BY THE LEAF



The leaf	Water	Time	Notes
Black (Ceylon, Assam, English Breakfast)	Just off the boil, 95–100°C	3–4 minutes	Takes milk gladly. Assam wants the full four.
Earl Grey and scented blacks	About 95°C	3 minutes	Let the bergamot arrive. Do not drown it in milk.
Green	75–80°C	2–3 minutes	Cooler water, shorter time. Bitterness is a brewing fault, not a character trait.
White	80–85°C	3–4 minutes	Patient and pale. It rewards attention and forgives nothing else.
Oolong	85–95°C	2–3 minutes	Steep the same leaves again. The second pot is often the best one.
Herbal and chamomile	Fully boiling	5 minutes or more	Cover the cup while it steeps. The good part is in the steam.

THE RIGHT TEA FOR THE AFTERNOON



A rainy market-day morning. Assam, brewed strong, with milk. Backbone weather wants a backbone tea.

A fireside afternoon. English Breakfast, a proper one, none of your nonsense. This is Bea Worthington's standing order and Bea Worthington is right.

An afternoon of quiet work. Green tea, brewed cool and short, refilled without fuss. The corner-table choice.

A small celebration. First-flush Darjeeling, no milk, full attention. Save it for news worth savouring.

The late golden hour. Honeyleaf Grey, when the light comes in low. Some teas have a time of day, and this is its.

The end of a long day. Second Steep, named for second chances, faintly smoky, entirely forgiving.

WHAT THE REGULARS DRINK



For the curious: Bea Worthington takes English Breakfast in the fireplace chair, and has since our first morning. Marcus Webb takes green tea at the corner table, refilled quietly so as not to interrupt. Constance Haverford takes Assam at the window with the Telegraph, and corrects the crossword in another hand. Regulars are how a tea room learns what it is. Choose your own order, defend it mildly, and drink it in the same chair until the chair is yours.



This companion is a gift for members of Clara Finch's readers' circle.

The Honeyleaf Tea Room Mysteries begin with The Earl Grey Alibi.

Find the full series at Clara Finch's website, and keep the kettle near.

MORE FROM CLARA FINCH

The Honeyleaf Shelf

Four more from the tea room, over about a week: a short story that happens before Book 1, printable pages from Lila's notebook, Archie's baking box, and the map of Maplewick.

The First Pot - A Honeyleaf Story

Before the tea room opened, and before anyone died in it.

Lila's Notebook Printables

The pages she actually uses, ready to print.

Archie's Baking Box

What comes out of the Honeyleaf kitchen, written down at last.

The Map of Maplewick

The high street, the guildhall, the woodland path and the long way round.

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