

TEA CULTURE – THE NETHERLANDS

Dutch Tea

TEA CULTURE DESCRIPTION

Tea Culture.

In the Netherlands, a cup of tea means a moment to relax and taking some time for yourself or your loved ones. Dutch people drink tea everywhere, all throughout the day and because the temperature outside isn't too hot for most part of the year it's an excellent way to warm up.

Hot water for tea is available in every workspace, you can buy it at almost every train station and the menu in every cafe has a clear space for tea and usually offers a wide variety of flavours. It's safe to say Dutch people love their cup of tea, they drink about three cups a day on average and 90% of the population are tea drinkers. Wherever you go, you will hear the phrase "coffee or tea?" inviting people in for a hot beverage and good conversation.

Tea's Purpose.

Having a cup of tea often means taking a small break. At work, there is usually a moment during the morning and the afternoon that's called 'tea-break' where people have a few minutes to take their mind off work, chat with colleagues and recharge.

At home, tea is a way to bring the family together and connect. In the evenings around 8 pm, after dinner, families drink tea and chat or watch the news together.

It's also a great way to wake up. Adults drink either tea or coffee but kids wake up with a cup of tea, often with a splash of milk to add some creaminess and to cool it down more quickly.

Tea History.

Everybody knows tea is famous in England, but it was the Dutch who first brought tea back to Europe in the early 1600s. Back then it was seen as a remedy and mostly drank by men. This changed around 1650 when it became an exclusive and exotic drink for rich Dutch women.

Later on, drinking tea became a social ritual. Women would come together in the afternoons to drink tea together and despite men not liking this habit at all it quickly spread. Around 1705 tea had become a common beverage drank by a large part of the Dutch population and was shipped to the Netherlands by the VOC (Dutch East India Company) from China and later Indonesia.

In A Word.

The Dutch word for tea is 'thee', and an invitation for friends, family and neighbours often sounds like 'kopje thee?' which means 'a cup of tea?' and is a way to ask someone over.

An even shorter, and 'cute' way of asking someone to join you for a cup of tea is 'theetje?', a one-word question. Dutch people love diminutives and add 'tje' to almost every word to 'soften them up' and make them sound gentle. Asking someone out or over for a 'theetje' literally means 'a small cup of tea' and is a really casual way of inviting someone for tea.

In a Phrase.

"Zin in een kopje thee?" which literally means "fancy a cup of tea?" is a common way to invite guests over to your house.

Another way of offering your guests a drink is by asking them if they like "koffie of thee?" offering them coffee or tea.

Arriving at someone's house for tea? Dutch people will welcome you with the words "kom binnen" which means "come in" and "ga lekker zitten", inviting guests to sit down and make themselves at home.

Favourite Brew.

Black tea is most common, but in recent years green and white tea have also conquered a spot, mostly because of their health benefits. But black tea is definitely still favourite and it is often used to make delicious tea blends. The Dutch love tea with exotic fruits like mango and local fruits such as berries in summer. When it gets colder black tea is combined with spices like cinnamon, cloves, liquorice root, cardamom and star anise, often all together in 'winter tea'-mixes. Usually, Dutch people drink their tea hot, even in summer. Homemade iced tea is not very popular and not many people know how to make it.

Earl Grey: black tea flavoured with bergamot oil. One of the reasons this tea is so popular is because it matches really well with the hardness of the tap water in the Netherlands.

Lemon tea: black tea leaves with lemon peel. Dutch people love this flavour because it's natural and fresh.

Winter tea: Dutch people love feeling 'cosy', especially in winter. Homely scents add to that feeling and in winter people love drinking tea blends with spices and winter fruits such as orange, pear and apple.

Bubble tea has become a popular beverage among youth and stores are popping up in larger cities. Because it's very sweet and not very healthy, adults and older people usually stay away from this drink.

Interpreting the Lingo.

Whether you're visiting and ordering your cup of tea in English, or try to say it like a local; there's no bad way to do it. Everybody will understand "a cup of tea, please", but they might ask if you prefer 'fresh mint or ginger tea or "normal" tea'. "Normal tea" is the Dutch way of describing an ordinary cup of tea made with a tea bag. If you see the flavours described on the menu you can order the one you like but often there is just 'tea' on the menu and you will be served a cup of hot water and a 'tea box' with different flavours to choose from.

Mint tea and ginger tea are technically not tea, yet Dutch people still call it that way. It's just hot water with either fresh mint leaves or chunks of fresh ginger, generally served with honey on the side.

Other Favourites.

A large number of Moroccans live in the Netherlands and that's how fresh mint tea found its way into Dutch tea habits and culture. Technically it's not tea, but on menu's, you'll always find it described as "verse muntthee", which means fresh mint tea. Hot water and mint leaves make a soft and fresh beverage that is usually served with honey on the side.

Fresh ginger tea is also a popular drink. Sometimes fresh ginger is added to a cup of tea, but in other cases, it's just hot water with chunks of ginger, also served with honey.

Another favourite is Rooibos (redbush), a herbal tea made from a plant that grows in South Africa with a flavour that's similar to hibiscus tea.

And finally chamomile tea. It's mild and well known for its soothing qualities making it a perfect bedtime drink. Can't sleep? A Dutch grandmother will make you a warm cup of chamomile before sending you off to bed.

The Netherlands is a small country and although different dialects are spoken in some parts, tea preference and habits don't vary. Convenient when you're planning a visit.

Where is it served.

Tea, coffee and water are the most popular drinks in the Netherlands and both coffee and tea are widely available. Where there's coffee there's tea and the other way around and that means you never have to look far for your next drink. Most Dutch homes and cafes have something called a 'tea box'. A box with different compartments for different flavours of tea, designed to keep the tea fresh and dry. Tea is usually served in a small tea bag, though the arrival of fancy tea shops has increased the use of loose leaf.

Because of its popularity, you can find tea everywhere. In restaurants, cafes, offices, homes and public transport. Wherever you go, tea is always an option.

Friends and families often spend quality time over a cup of tea. They meet up in a cafe for a chat or watch a movie together. It's also a very common drink at breakfast, brunch and lunch.

Are you out looking for a cup of tea? Look at for a "Kiosk" at the train station, or a "restaurant", "café" or "bistro". Want to buy a delicious winter blend to take home? A local supermarket is the place to go or a tea shop like "Simon Levelt".

How often it is enjoyed.

People drink tea with breakfast, with lunch, during their breaks, when they travel, at birthday parties, funerals and job interviews. About three cups a day on average. The only time people don't drink tea is at dinner.

Though some people have a preference for coffee, they usually still drink tea during the day as well.

For some people, their cup of tea is a sacred ritual and important part of the day. It's often a habit and the first thing they drink after waking up, arriving at work or on their way there.

Are you invited over to someone's house to have tea? If you're meeting them in the morning 10 AM is the perfect time to have tea, in the afternoon it's around 3 PM and in the evening around 8 PM.

TEA RITUAL/CEREMONY DESCRIPTION

Tea Ritual / Ceremony.

These days, old fashioned tea kettles on a stove are a rare sight. They have all been replaced with electronic kettles and you'll find one in every Dutch household.

The water goes straight from the kettle into the cup and that's where the tea is added. Some people like their tea really strong, others not at all and the preference varies so people usually don't make the tea for you. Some people like their tea sweet and add sugar or honey, some also like a bit of milk but a lot of people don't add anything.

How tea is served.

Tea in the Netherlands is served in a big, clear glass or ceramic cup or mug. Definitely not in cute little cups like you see in other countries, and people really expect to get a lot of tea. The serving size is supposed to be bigger than a cup of coffee. Because people's taste in how strong they like their tea varies a lot, the hot water and tea are served separately. That way you can drink it as strong as you like. Tea is usually not served in a pot, but in a glass to give everyone the chance to choose a flavour they like.

In restaurants, tea is always served in clear glass, that way it's easy to see how strong you make your tea. It comes with a saucer that holds the glass, some sugar and a small cookie. Restaurants not serving tea with a small cookie is rare and considered inhospitable. Tea is generally not served with milk but usually, it's no problem to get some if you ask for it.

At kiosks and small shops outside tea comes in a to-go cup. Usually, you get a cup of hot water and take your sugar, milk and tea from a self-service station.

Served with / food pairing.

The Netherlands knows a strong cookie culture. In supermarkets, you'll find tea, coffee and cookies in the same aisle and there is a huge variety.

People drink tea with lunch and breakfast, but don't spend much time thinking about which flavour goes best with their cheese sandwich. Restaurants also don't pair tea and food and the flavour you choose is solely based on personal preference.

In recent years the concept of 'high-tea' has gained popularity and most tea houses and cafes offer one. On those occasions, tea is often served in a pot or people can get unlimited refills.

A Dutch high tea consists of a number of sweet and savoury bites, often enough to serve as lunch.

Tea etiquette.

One of the most important aspects of drinking tea is eating cookies. Households usually keep their 'tea box' and 'cookie tin' in the same place. Not offering a cookie with a cup of tea is considered cheap, but taking more than one per cup of tea can be considered greedy.

If your tea is served with a biscuit, it is completely okay to dunk it into your cup to soften it up before eating it. Many people enjoy eating their cookies that way. If you're lucky enough to get a famous Dutch caramel waffle, you can leave it on your cup for a few minutes and let the hot steam soften up the caramel on the inside.

When you're visiting someone's house, they will usually offer you one cookie for each cup of tea you drink. The cookie box may still be on the table, it's very impolite to help yourself without being offered. Want that next cup of tea, and of course a cookie? Wait until it is offered, never ask for it. Hinting is okay though, you could say something like "that cup of tea was really nice, and I loved the cookie", and people will offer you another cup or ignore your comment.

Generally, people drink two cups of tea during a visit, but when things get really 'gezellig' (cosy) it's okay to accept another one. But when you feel your host is just being polite but really wants to get on with their own business, you should politely refuse that third cup.

Dutch people are straight forward and generally, it's okay to decline an invitation for tea but keep in mind that offering someone you've just met a cup of tea is often a way of saying 'I'd like to get to know you better' and a really nice gesture. When you refuse, you're not just turning down that cup of tea, you're also saying 'no' to the opportunity of making a new friend.

When you've made it to someone's living room or meeting someone in a cafe for a cup of tea, drink and stir it whichever way you like but keep the noise to a minimum. Try to stir calmly and slurping is absolutely not done and considered quite rude when you're above the age of seven.

Tea vs. Coffee culture.

Tea is as common as coffee and although the Dutch drink slightly more coffee, tea is gaining popularity. Both are equally common and available. Some people don't drink coffee, but most coffee drinkers also enjoy a cup of tea, usually later in the day or when they have reached their maximum number of cups of coffee they allow themselves to drink in a day. Many people stop drinking coffee in the afternoon and switch to tea.

When someone offers you a drink, the question is generally "coffee or tea?".

Other info.

People used to get tea from the supermarket, sometimes a tea speciality store but there weren't many. This has changed, more and more of these stores seem to open and people love the huge variety of tea blends they offer. Caramelized fruits and nuts for example, and exotic flavours that are popular in other countries. Dutch people love trying new things and aren't afraid to stray away from the flavours they know to explore other options.