Tom Hutchinson

"WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DRINK?" AN ENGLISHMAN'S VIEW OF BRITISH DRINKING HABITS.

"What would you like to drink?" If you were asked this in England, would you know what you were being offered? — tea, coffee, whisky, beer, fruit juice? It would after all be impolite to ask for something your host could not provide, and you might find it a little embarassing if you are the only one drinking whisky, while everyone else is taking tea. Even if you know the name of what you should ask for, it might not be the drink you expected. There are many different ways of preparing the same drink: coffee as served in Yugoslavia is very different from the English cup of coffee, and both are different in turn from the German or American beverage.

What people drink and the social behaviour that surrounds drinking will vary widely from country to country. In Britain the first factor you must consider is where you are. Outside the home there is a sharp division between alcoholic drink places and non-alcoholic drink places, and this division lies at the heart of many British drinking habits. Thus, unlike the typical Continental café, the British café serves only tea and coffee and soft drinks (lemonade, Cola and the like): it is definitely a non-alcoholic drink place. The pub, on the other hand, is where alcohol reigns supreme. Ask for a soft drink in a pub and you will almost certainly be pressed by whoever is buying the round to take something stronger. People seem to feel almost guilty asking for a non-alcoholic drink in a pub. Tea and coffee are unheard of in the bar, and even fruit juice is a little suspect. "Oh, I'll just have a grapefruit juice," you will hear people say, as if apologising for refusing to honour Bacchus and his crew.

Restaurants bridge the gap between hard and soft drink places; but a word of warning here: alcoholic drinks are expensive in Britain wherever you buy them and in restaurants they will cost anything from two to four times as much as they would in a shop.

But, what if you are not in a public place? What if you are in someone's home or in a colleague's office? How can you now be guided in your choice of a drink? Take heart! There is a simple question to ask yourself: "What time of day is it?" If it is outside the lunch break, say, 11:30 to 2:30, or any other time before 7 o'clock in the evening, you can safely assume that what you are being offered is either tea or coffee. During the lunch period an alcoholic drink would be quite in order, though usually only if you were in a pub or restaurant; in the evening alcohol is the norm, wherever you are.

Now, what is so special about these times? The answer lies in that peculiar British institution known as the "licensing laws". These regulations for the management of public houses first came in during the First World War and were intended to prevent the highly paid munitions workers from spending all their money and time in the local pub. As with so many things, although the original reason has ceased to exist, the laws remain.

The licensing laws, among other things, restrict the times when pubs are allowed to be open to two periods in the day: the lunch period (approximately 11 or 10:30 to 2:30) and the evening (7p. m. to 11 p. m.). On Sundays the times are even shorter: 12 till 2 and 7:30 till 10:30. Thus the poor tourist in search of a long refreshing glass of beer at the end of his afternoon's sightseeing trip will knock in vain at the pub door: they will remain firmly shut until the appointed hour. Anyone under 18 years of age will be even more unlucky: the licensing laws also forbid the sale of alcoholic drinks to anyone under 18.

This system of opening hours has led to an association in the national subconscious between alcoholic drinks and certain times of the day, and this association extends far beyond the bounds of the pub door. There are some parts of the day which are quite definitely non-alcoholic, and the average Briton, whether in a public or private place, will neither offer nor accept anything but tea and coffee during these times.

So, let us assume you are in someone's home and your host asks: "What would you like to drink?". You have established that it is a non--alcoholic time of day, so you reply: "Tea, please." or "I'll have a coffee, please". Now comes the testing time. Do you actually know what you will get? Will the cup that is placed before you contain the fine beverage you are used to or some sickly brew you can hardly bear to look at, let alone drink?

Take tea, for example. Now tea is a subject that arouses the passions of the Englishman like nothing else. It flows in his bloodstream. The tea break is the focal point around which both morning and afternoon are organised. In times of crisis the first source of comfort and support is tea: the universal remedy for the sick, the injured, the depressed is "tea and sympathy" (note the order). There is no sound more welcome to the English ear than the words: "I'll just put the kettle on". In short, tea is more than just a drink, it is a national institution.

As with all important events, a certain amount of ritual surrounds the preparation of a pot of tea. The general Continental practice of casually dunking a tea bag into a cup of hot water is regarded with horror and disdain. Even the use of the tea bag in place of proper loose leaf tea is rather suspect: nothing should be allowed to come between the vital ingredients of good tea and good water.

The true English cup of tea is made in a teapot. The water used must be freshly drawn from the tap and must be boiling hot. This is no approximate temperature: it must boil and still be as near to boiling point as it is humanly possible to achieve. To this end, the teapot must first be warmed, so that the heat of the water is not lost in heating up a cold pot, and then the tea is put in: the normal measure is one teaspoonful for each person and "one for the pot". When the water boils the teapot is brought to the kettle — not the other way round as this would allow a slight drop of temperature — and the still boiling water is poured into the pot. The tea is then left to brew for 3 to 4 minutes, during which time the pot should be kept warm by covering it with a kind of woolen or quilted hat called a tea cosy.

When the tea is ready it is poured into the cups through a tea strainer to catch any bits of tea that may come out. Milk is added to the tea in the cup, but not sugar — you put that in yourself. So beware, if you do not

want milk in your tea (or coffee), you must say so before it is served up to you. Then prepare yourself for probably the strongest cup of tea you have ever tasted.

In contrast to their passionate love of tea, the British have a peculiarly careless and perfunctory attitude to coffee. If you go to Britain, you should go prepared to do without a decent cup of coffee for the duration of your stay. Coffee, it seems, is regarded as a means of working up, but as of little other value. First and foremost, it should be realised that what the British call coffee is in fact instant coffee. Coffee served in cafés and even some restaurants is also made from instant coffee. There is no ritual surrounding its preparation: simply take a cup, throw in a spoonful of the powder and pour on hot water or milk and there it is — coffee, of a sort. If you are a coffee lover, avoid drinking English coffee.

Like tea, coffee is served in a teacup and milk is automatically added, unless you ask for it black. Again you put in your own sugar. So to illustrate the fact that just knowing the name of the drink is not enough, remember that the drink called coffee in Yugoslavia is served in small cups, black, strong and sweet. In Britain the same drink comes in a large cup, white, weak and unsweetened.

As far as alcoholic drinks are concerned, the national differences are narrowing all the time. The growth of international trade and tourism has meant that almost any drink is available anywhere. But accepting this standardisation of liquor, whether for good or ill, there are still enough differences in national drinking habits to make it a subject worthy of study. Learn how and what a people drink and you learn a lot about the people, and even if you never come to like the drinks themselves, at least you will know what to ask for and what to expect when someone says: "What would you like to drink?"

Pierre Calderon

LA FRANCE DES JEUX DE HASARD

Il est une France que les manuels n'évoquent guère: celle des jeux de hasard. Relève-t-on une exception, elle s'avère partielle. "De l'espoir pour cinq francs", 40ème leçon du *Français niveau 2* Michèle et Michel Verdelhan, traite du seul Tiercé. Et pourtant...

Ici les chiffres sont, comme on dit, éloquents. En 1975, 28% de la population active française (soit 21.000.000 environ de personnes) pratiquent le tiercé, 17% la Loterie nationale, et 3% les casinos et autres établissements de jeux. A quoi il faut ajouter, en 1978, deux ans seulement après sa création, le 19 mai 1976, les 20% qu'a su obtenir le loto. Tant et si bien qu'on a pu écrire que "La France semble tout entière saisie par le démon du jeu" (III).

Regardons le diable en face. Il n'a pas de quoi nous effrayer beaucoup: en tant qu'il joue, c'est tout un chacun autour de nous, et peut-être quelqu'un qui ne nous est pas un inconnu, — nous-même. Mais considérons plutôt les