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LIT374 Food in Literature

03 May 2018

Tea in Appalachia

The importance of what we drink is often overlooked and taken for granted especially when the drink in question is extremely common and not illegal. Considering how integral tea is to the culture of the Appalachian region of the United States, it is surprising to find out that there is not a lot of information or scholarly sources on the topic. Various teas have been a part of Appalachian culture since before European settlers first arrived in the area. Native Americans introduced a lot of recipes to the first settlers that came to the mountains. These recipes were adopted and adapted by the settlers and have since been a large part of Appalachian culture. To demonstrate the variety of different teas and their uses, this video will discuss the history, cultural significance, and representations of a few medicinal teas and Russian tea in Appalachia.

Native Americans shared many things with early Appalachian settlers, one of them being their knowledge of medicinal plant recipes. These recipes ranged from simple spring tonics to teas that could induce miscarriages. Early European colonists often settled in places that were far removed from medical professionals and so they had to utilize whatever local medicinal plants and recipes that they could get their hands on. The native tribes proved to be invaluable sources of local knowledge to the early settlers.

One of the plants that the Native Americans showed the settlers how use was the sassafras tree. There are many different things that one can make with the sassafras tree, ranging from jelly(Foxfire), to root beer(Perma), and to of course tea. There are two main varieties of the sassafras tree, the more common version is the small white sassafras tree and the most prized is the taller red variety (Appalachian History).

In the 1992 book, *The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Cookery* edited by Linda Garland Page and Eliot Wigginton, the reader is introduced to Pearl Martin a native Appalachian whose specialty is sassafras tea (42-45). She grows and gathers the sassafras herself and gives us these next instructions for making sassafras foods. To make good sassafras tea you need to collect the roots when they are young and you can either dry them or use them fresh. To make a gallon of tea you need to boil four average sized roots for about fifteen to twenty minutes. If you have larger roots you can mash them before boiling to help release the juices. A jelly can also be made from the sassafras tea, by adding a jelly mix and sugar in copious amounts and then letting the mixture set (Foxfire 43, 44).

There are many different places where you can find the writers saying, that when you make sassafras tea in the spring it helps wake up your blood for the new year. But most of these sources also warn not to drink too much of the tea and there is an old Cherokee tradition cautioning against drinking the tea for more than a week at a time. Now that science has improved we know that the sassafras tree contains a few volatile oils, the largest amount being safrole oil, which after studies with rats has been shown to cause cancer. It is not known whether this is unique to rats because of how they metabolize safrole oil, or if the oil can also cause cancer in humans. Because of these studies the FDA has stated that safrole oil is “reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen” and consequently banned from the United States market

in 1960. Also the FDA classified safrole oil is a List 1 chemical, because it has been used in the production of ecstasy. (Appalachian History, and FDA)

Another medicinal tea is one used in the 2016 book by Julia Franks, *Over the Plain Houses*.(137-144) In Franks' story, Irene finds herself with an unwanted pregnancy and turns to an old recipe labeled "Indian Tea". This tea uses pennyroyal, also named Squaw Mint, as the active ingredient to cause abortions. Franks does not give a great amount of detail of what exactly the recipe says, but does mention snakeroot and brewers yeast. Irene boils the snakeroot and then adds the pennyroyal to steep and lastly adds brewers yeast to the mixture. The recipe does not specify the dosage, but cautions against drinking the tea for more than ten days.

The recipe cautions this because while pennyroyal has been used by the Native Americans and other Appalachians for centuries, this plant is toxic as well. There are stories of accidental poisonings because pennyroyal smells and resembles mint. According to the National Institutes of Health, even the consumption of one ounce of pennyroyal oil can cause multi-organ failure resulting in death. The majority of pennyroyal poisonings are cases of women in their late teens or early twenties taking the plant's extract in an abortion attempt. Even though this plant is highly toxic, people still use it for aromatherapy and you can easily buy the oil for under ten dollars.

On a brighter note, Russian Tea is a little recorded but widely known drink in the south and Appalachia. An interesting fact, is that there is a key difference between the British tea culture that was already in the United States in the late 1800's and the tea culture that the first wave of Russian immigrants brought when they started coming to the US. In British tea culture, milk is something that can be added to the tea based on personal preference, while in Russian tea culture, lemon or lemon juice may be added. The two styles can never be mixed because citrus

juices, especially lemon, curdle milk when mixed together. Because of this, it is relatively easy to tell when a tea or tea recipe has a British or Russian cultural background based on what is described to go with the tea.

In the year 1727, Russia signed a treaty with China, opening markets for trade between the two countries (Britannica). This started the flow of tea into Russia, and by the beginning of the 1800's the demand for tea had spread from the royal court in western European Russia all the way to Turkestan, Caucasus, and Siberia.(Lee) Tea and its culture became an integral part of Russian society and life by the end of the 1800's: when Russians were immigrating to America, they brought their traditions with them and they started to become part of American society.

One of the earliest references to Russian tea in the United States is in the December 3rd, 1882 edition of *The New York Times*. The paper made a quick mention to the drink by way of a doctor recommending tea with a few drops of lemon juice as a good refreshing drink for the recreational tricyclist. (Yesterday Dish) By the 1890's Russian tea had made its way into the high society circles of Raleigh, North Carolina and was mentioned by Sarah McCulloh Lemon in her article for *The North Carolina Historical Review*. The popularity of this drink spread across the United States, and with that spread came different variations on the ingredients and the actual name of the recipe. Recipes started to include more fruit juices besides lemon, the most common addition being orange juice, and in larger quantities. The earliest inclusion of Russian tea in a cookbook is in Irma S. Rombauer's 1931 cookbook, *The Joy of Cooking*. (376) She named her recipe "Fruit Punch", since it includes the juices of five lemons, five oranges, and a cup of maraschino cherries. Unlike your average fruit punch consisting only of fruit juices, Rombauer's recipe called for hot tea to be added to the mixture.

The fresh liquid Russian tea is a recipe that only those who had access to lemons and oranges could make, therefore highlighting a class distinction between those who could make the recipe and those who could not afford the fresh fruit. Citrus trees have to be grown in an area where it does not frost and since most if not all of the Appalachian region can get cold enough to frost, the citrus fruit that the locals wanted to eat had to be imported. (Farms) This would have made the fruits too expensive for someone to buy if they were struggling financially.

In the 1960's a new version of the recipe emerged that made it more accessible to more people. Tang, a powdered fruit juice mix, introduced to the American market in 1959, rose to popularity in the 60's in connection with the space race. New recipes for Russian tea, made with instant tea and Tang, came into the food scene. In the May 12th, 1966 edition of the *Statesville (North Carolina) Record and Landmark*, there was published a recipe for Instant Russian tea consisting of Tang, sugar, cinnamon, ground cloves, and instant tea.

While admittedly there is not a lot of research or scholarly sources to be found on the subject of Russian tea in Appalachia, there is a large quantity of recipes to be found in Appalachian and Southern cookbooks. Additionally there are no literary sources that I could find during the time spent researching this project, but felt that the vast amount of cookbook entries gave this topic enough credibility to be included.

In conclusion, tea has not been researched enough, especially in its connection to Appalachian history and culture. There is a lot of information that has yet to be found, written about and incorporated into the stories of Appalachia, and therefore I do not think that I have been able to do this topic justice. Tea is a very important part of Appalachia and I hope that I have been able to make that clear in this project.

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