

Coffee, Tea, Cocoa

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE



CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. She has called Maine her home for the last thirty years.



IF YOU'VE EVER WATCHED THE POPULAR TV show *The Big Bang Theory*, you're familiar with Sheldon Cooper. The fictional character is a theoretical physicist at the California Institute of Technology. He has a genius-level IQ of 187, claims to possess an eidetic memory, has extensive knowledge of a wide range of subjects from chemistry to economics to geography to linguistics, is more or less proficient in several Western and Eastern languages, and sings with perfect pitch. He is also terribly annoying and a constant aggravation to his friends due to his highly deficient social skills, often displaying extreme stubbornness, egocentrism, lack of empathy, and downright meanness.

Sheldon did, however, learn one respectable habit from his mother that shows up now and then in the story. When someone is sad or troubled, he asks them if they would like a hot beverage—tea or cocoa being his usual offering—because he was told this is consoling and comforting, and the right thing to do in such situations.

Yes, it is true. Hot beverages—coffee, tea, cocoa—bring warmth and comfort to one's entire being. Cupping a warm mug in one's hands and slowly sipping the hot and sweet or creamy liquid miraculously softens the edges of a rough day or a difficult moment. And the fact that someone reaches out to offer a hot drink only makes the restorative effect more powerful.

Enjoying a latte or a mug of hot tea on a quiet afternoon while reading is a delightful way to spend time alone—I do it often. But there are many social underpinnings to the ways in which we prepare and consume coffee, tea, and cocoa. Indeed, regional, national, and local traditions have developed that elevate the importance of preparing and sharing these drinks.

Think of the highly ritualized Japanese Tea Ceremony; the Habesha Coffee Ceremony

in Ethiopia, where coffee drinking had its start at least as early as the fifteenth century; the British practice of afternoon tea and cream scones; the coffeehouse culture of Vienna, which actually originated in the Arab world; the Scandinavian and German custom of Coffee Table, which brings hot coffee together with wonderfully scented cardamom buns and other delicious pastries and cakes; and the serving of decadent, ultra-thick and dark drinking chocolate in France, Italy, Spain, and a few other countries in Europe. Perhaps your own family has traditions regarding coffee, tea, or cocoa that might determine when to drink, what cup or mug to use, how to handle the preparations, and even what to talk about—or not talk about—while enjoying a drink and each other's company.

These three ubiquitous beverages, loved and enjoyed by nearly everyone, carry a great deal of tradition and meaning. But nothing starts out with meaning. Rather, over time and with engagement and experience, we attach meaning to things, and in some cases, that meaning is so compelling and far-reaching that it gets passed on to one's successors. That is what happened with coffee, tea, and cocoa over centuries.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony, dating back centuries, is intended to bring harmony and tranquility to guests while taking a break from the usual business of life and attending to the simple act of drinking tea. The ceremony ritualizes respect, righteousness, discipline, and contentment.

The Habesha Coffee Ceremony is a regular occurrence in people's homes in and around Ethiopia. Traditionally hosted by a woman, the ceremony starts with washing, roasting, and grinding beans, and culminates with the rich, flavorful brew being poured into small cups that are passed around to the guests. Storytelling and discussion add to the enjoyment of the event. It is considered a great honor to host the ceremony as it celebrates the virtues of hospitality, friendship, and respect.

Yes, Sheldon is correct, offering someone a hot beverage is a kind and generous act in societies around the globe. The particulars might vary, but the meaning is the same. ☼

