

# On the English Tea & Portugal

Text & photos by Jorge Serpa

There I was, talking with some friends and colleagues at one of those beautiful official functions. Suddenly the conversation turned to “low tea,” that “so English” tradition of having tea and scones in the middle of the afternoon. Quite naturally, I just couldn’t resist giving some credit where credit was due: the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza, Queen Consort of King Charles II of England.

There is quite an animated debate among historians on the tea drinking habits of the English in the mid 1600s. There are no doubts that tea—*Camellia Sinensis*, an evergreen plant native to East and South Asia—was already known in England at that time. As a matter of fact, drinking tea was being “sold” there as a cure-all for apoplexy, catarrh, colic, tuberculosis, dizziness, epilepsy, calculus, lethargy, migraine, paralysis, and vertigo! But there are no doubts as well that it was Queen Catherine who introduced the English court to the habit of drinking tea in the afternoon, a custom which was already popular in the Portuguese court.

The Portuguese navigators arrived in China and Japan in the early 1500s. In 1553 they settled in Macau—first somewhat “illegally” and four years later with the blessing of the Chinese authorities—where they based the first direct trading network between the Far East and Europe. The Portuguese were thus the first Europeans to have direct contact with the extensive tea trade that flourished on that side of the world. But in Europe, the custom of drinking tea took some time to stick. The early adopters was the *bourgeoisie* in France and Netherlands, who started to consume the aromatic beverage in the first half of the 1600s. In England, tea seems to have appeared publicly at a few coffee houses in or around 1650. In 1662 Catherine married King Charles II and moved to the English court, bringing with her the ritual of the mid-afternoon tea. Soon the habit took root among the English society, and the rest is history...!



Statue of Queen Catherine of Braganza in Lisbon

## Other Legacies of Queen Catherine in the UK

“Low tea” (see boxed text at the end for the difference between “high” and “low” tea) was not the only thing that Catherine brought with her from Portugal. She is also credited with being the one who introduced orange marmalade to England. The Queen was born and brought up in Vila Viçosa (literally, *Luxuriant Village*), a little town in Alentejo where orange groves abounded (and still abound today).

The claim that it was Catherine who introduced the use of the fork on English tables is a bit more shaky: the fork was already known in England at the time, albeit rarely used—contrary to the norm in Italy, Spain and Portugal.

...but there are no doubts what-so-ever about Tangier (in today's Morocco) and Bombay (in India): as part of Catherine's wedding dowry, Portugal gave these two important port towns to England.

## Queen Catherine's Legacy in the US

Catherine is also behind the name of Queens in New York. Both Queens County and Kings County were established in 1683. Kings County—later Brooklyn—was named for Charles II, England's ruler at the time, and Queens County was named for his wife, Catherine.



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The Knot's Gate at the Ducal Palace in Vila Viçosa





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Façade of the Ducal Palace in Vila Viçosa

Portugal's privileged relationship with tea has yet another important link: it is in this country that the only tea plantations in Europe are located! Sometime around the end of the 18th century, beginning of the 19th, tea seeds were brought to the island of S. Miguel in the Azores (most likely from Brazil). These seeds were planted in regions of micro-climates around Porto Formoso and Capelas, on the northern slopes of the island. Conditions here proved to be ideal for tea, so much so that, by the end of the 19th century, there were close to a dozen tea factories in operation in the island. Of these, two remain in operations today: Chá Gorreana and Chá Porto Formoso (<http://www.ChaPortoFormoso.com>).

“Low tea,” also known as “afternoon tea,” is a light meal typically eaten between 3:00 and 5:00 pm. Tea (traditionally brewed in a teapot and served with milk and sugar) is accompanied by scones, cakes, and sandwiches.

“High tea” is an early evening meal (normally served between 5:00 and 6:00 pm), where tea is traditionally served with meats, eggs or fish, cheeses, cakes and sandwiches.

Rather curiously, the designations “low” and “high” had their origins on the tables from which the tea was served! “Low tea” was served in the living room from low (coffee-like) tables placed by sofas and arm chairs. “High tea” was served in the dining room, from a normal dining table and chairs.

In the US today, “high tea” refers to a very formal tea party in which tea, thin sandwiches and little cakes are served on the best china. In this usage, the term “high” is associated with social formality, and not with the height of the table!

