

The Metamorphosis of Tea. Teahouses and Tea shops in Bucharest

Gabriela LUCA*

University of Bucharest

Abstract: This paper examines the increase of public, non-domestic tea consumption in Bucharest. In order to offer a full picture, I approached the consumer engines in terms of both teahouses' owners and consumers. I found that most entrepreneurs have established their business in an effort to have a place of their own, quiet, where to practice their passions with people who share the same values and interests. Consumers, in turn, are attracted primarily by the interior space of the teahouses. Their reasons are the most diverse: for relaxation and dreaming, to escape from the city's violent stimuli, for introspection, for new bodily experiences, to strengthen or build friendship, romantic or business relationships, as well as for the 'dream' characteristics of the teahouses' environment. Both the teahouses' owners and their consumers may be regarded as varieties of prosumers.

Keywords: *consumption, tea, drinking, urban, consumption spaces, prosumer*

Introduction

The research analyzes the growth of tea drinking in public space. I was first interested in studying consumers: what are their experiences related to drinking tea? How do they select the tea varieties? Which are the meanings they attach to this practice and what kind of relationships do they build tea drinking? Early in my research, I found myself confronted with the role played by tea traders and teahouses'

owners in the expansion of the taste for tea. Starting from this new research question, I turned my research efforts to analyzing the context that favored the opening of numerous teahouses and tea shops. I wanted to find out how is the tea supply organized: who are the traders, what type of products do they offer to consumers and how do they advance them?

In a similar approach, but aiming to identify how the taste for coffee has been built during the 1980s and 1990s

*email: filofteia.luca@gmail.com.

in the US, William Roseberry stated that ‘my newfound freedom to choose, and the taste and discrimination I cultivate [in terms of consumption of coffee], have been shaped by traders and marketers responding to a longterm decline in sales with a move toward market segmentation along class and generational lines’ (1996: 771). I tried to extend the conclusion of Roseberry to drinking tea as well. Roseberry concluded that ‘they [the strategies] work not because there is a manipulable mass out there waiting to be told what to drink but because there is a complex, if specific, intersection between the shaping actions of various actors in the coffee trade and the needs, tastes and desires of particular groups of consumers and potential consumers’ (1996: 773). Unlike Roseberry, I tried to devote more attention to how the consumer space is structured and the role that it plays in influencing the consumption of tea.

Methodology and data gathering

In order to understand the growth of tea consumption outside home, I have collected a variety of empirical materials. Firstly I interviewed the owners of several teahouses. Support also came from journalists who have interviewed the entrepreneurs themselves, especially those to whom I did not have access to. Thus, the main sources used to obtain information were such entrepreneurs and media materials. The interviews taken have been published mostly in magazines, websites and economic dailies¹. I have also used information from leisure and lifestyle internet sites², as they are

some of the most frequently accessed pages by Bucharest net users. In other words, I have accessed the main sources that consumers use when seeking information about new leisure destinations in Bucharest.

Another source of information was the teahouses’ web page³. With few exceptions, most of the tearooms and tea shops have chosen this form of promotion. I have browsed these pages in order to identify certain descriptive elements of teahouses, tea varieties offered on the menu and detect differentiating aspects (organized events, exhibitions, concerts, etc.). The online environment has enabled me to access also other two sources: *blogs*⁴ and *facebook*. A large number of tearooms and tea shops’ owners have opened these pages in order to mediate the relationship between them and their clients. Some owners are even conducting interviews questioning visitors about their favorite tea varieties. Last, but not the least important factor, my own experience with tea consumption has helped me in understanding the topic of this research.

The emergence of tea shops

In recent years, the tea began to have a special place in the everyday life of many of Bucharest inhabitants. The relatively high number of tee-rooms and tea shops is a clear indication of that. Until recently, tea was consumed only at home, with the leading role of adjuvant of certain diseases. The first entrepreneurs public tea consumption were considered bold, taking into account the economic risks that they assumed when opening teahouses.

Entrepreneurs almost unanimously agree that this business is not one from which to get rich⁵. Most of the entrepreneurs have, of course, as the main goal the recovery of initial investment, while the long term for the business is to sustain itself. The risk that entrepreneurs have originally taken was certainly larger, as they also assumed the role of educating consumers' taste for tea.

Taking into account these risks, the business intertwined around tea might have failed, as it did happen with some of them. However, 'because the emergence of several teahouses, tea became a mean of socializing, and teahouses even became favorite places for business meetings' (T. S., entrepreneur⁶). This was more so in those cases where the teahouses are located near an office area. As one tea trader declared, 'they [office workers] come, take from the suitcase their laptop and work' (V. S., trader⁷).

Why did teahouses open up?

The initial investment in a tea business is small. In Romania, teahouses and tea shops have not yet their own status. In CAEN8 (National Classification of Economic Activities) these businesses are included under number 5630, for *bars and other activities serving drinks*. For this reason, the total number of teahouses and tea shops opened in Romanian and/or only in Bucharest can not be estimated. For some entrepreneurs the fact that there is no specific segmentation of this business is an advantage because, in this context, investment in a teahouse is a smaller one. In this regard, one

entrepreneur said:

The good part is that the investment in a teahouse is not that great – certainly, I'm not talking about a luxury one, as in Paris. [...] in France, for example, a kilogram of tea costs as much as a coffee one due to the very high taxes. In our country tea is still ignored, so that there is still a chance that whoever opens a teahouse not to have very high costs, although there are charges for this product as well (Dan Chisu⁹).

Strengthening an existing business.

It was the case of Cărturești teahouse that came to enlarge the holistic concept of the library 'reading, gourmet, art', adding 'that superior quality that makes the place desirable' (V. S., trader¹⁰). Entrepreneurs recognize that although they have not necessarily meant to 'carry out an educational project [...] Cărturești has quite a strong influence on the public that step into the store as well as on who want to be able to do so. Cărturești raised the bar very high by bringing together text, visual arts, music and taste, in a concept that links them together' (N. D. and Ș. R., teahouse owners¹¹).

Testing a market niche. In many advanced economies, market segmentation became the dominant business model during the 1980s and 1990s, when coffee traders, trying to combat the decline in consumption, target differently the consumers based on their lifestyles and preferences, in order to meet the needs of each group with a specific product (Amin, 1994; Roseberry, 1996; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). This has succeeded to transform potential customers into actual consumers. One teahouse owner, expressed very well this idea:

‘I did everything at the suggestion of a Slovenian friend [...] I thought of a niche market because, in Romania, cafes and bars, were enough. In addition, there were many places that serve tea, but few teahouses’¹².

Gaining consumers through the aestification of teahouses’ premises. One trader¹³ explained how the teahouse business became an addition to her main job in communication. She has been working as a middle manager in an advertising agency. Teahouse business, according to her is an activity that helps her leave the office and put aside the world of ‘plastic advertising’, as she put it. These two activities seem to work had in had: her experience in the field of communication has helped her to give coherence to a business solution that combines elements of beauty and quality at a fair price. At the same time, she assigns the success of her tea store to the personal relationship that she has built with her customers. In this case, the business idea came first, followed by the desire to provide a beautiful tea store; then, it grew into a chain of such stores.

Sharing tea-related passions. These businesses become non-standard business forms by the projection of owners’ personal visions onto the space of tea consumption. In this regard, one teahouse owner stated that ‘for me tea is an emotion. It is an oscillation between solitude and socializing. I love to see people gathered for a cup of tea, telling stories. It is a certain warmth and intimacy, I might say complexity, in the group of tea drinkers. However, sometimes I wish to enjoy a tea cup at times of relaxation, alone, when tea offers me a feeling of peace’¹⁴. The items associated with tea consumption

convinced her that a tea will be primarily appealing to workers in the services sector, well paid, who seek this kind of places.

Tea and Consumers

Consumers’ taste for certain types of tea is the main factor influencing selection when entrepreneurs make up the menu. However, assuming an educational role, the products offer is completed with items especially appreciated by consumers. One may outline a division between consumers, based on preferences and experience. Experienced consumers prefer pure tea, while the less experienced ones are turning to fruit teas, strongly flavored, which do not actually contain tea plant. One teahouse owner explained that ‘traditional tea drinkers from Great Britain, Russia and Asian countries turn to traditional varieties. Those who discovered this pleasure more recently, chose more aromatic mixtures’¹⁵. However Romanian consumers are willing to experience new things. Another tea trader explained that ‘it is fantastic the Romanians are opening and have the desire to educate themselves in this regard’¹⁶. She added that there is a transition to the accumulation of experience in tea drinking, judging, at least from the way in which pure tea, especially green, is beginning to gain ground.

We have seen so far that tea traders have assumed the role of mediators, distributing both products appreciated by experienced consumers, as well as mixtures required by a wider audience. Together with the existing

product offering for those with less experience, teahouses also put forth suggestions about the ways certain products should be consumed. This happens both in an informal manner ('the waiter explained how the tea should be served'¹⁷), but also in a more formal manner, by organizing special events under the umbrella of taste education. It is the case of *Coffee and Tea Festival*, 2009¹⁸, which included a series of street delivery events, together with performances in different teahouses and exhibitions of tea, coffee and accessories. The main purpose of the event was to promote coffee and tea consumption, but also to bring forward the immaterial traditions and serving rituals.

One could claim that tea consumers are similar, having similar lifestyles. Common hobbies, the desire to discover new passions bring individuals together. To some extent the traditional limits imposed by the seller-buyer relationship are removed. This approximates that George Ritzer's concept of prosumer might be appropriate for the people who gravitate around teahouses (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Moreover, Maffesoli's concepts (1996/1988) of 'neo-tribes' or 'affective tribes' might be relevant. He suggested that such groups are characterized by an intrinsic dynamic, while the relationships between individuals are not very strong, precisely because the groups are built temporary, spontaneously and more than often they are not mutually exclusive. The individuals have large freedom of migration from one group to another, depending on the beliefs of the moment.

Teahouses' interior spaces

Tea drinkers are attracted primarily by the consumer space and only in the second place by the product characteristics. In the following lines, I will focus on the description of this environment and how this influences consumption. I have approached this issue from a dual perspective: what is offered by the teahouses' owners and how it is received and integrated by customers. This insight has been highlighted by Jean Baudrillard. He has described that 'this symbolic gift that objects placed on the stage imitate, this symbolic and silent exchange between offered object and the eye calls clearly for a further real and economic exchange' (Baudrillard, 2005/1970: 214). More than an economic transaction, the display facilitates the communication between individuals 'not through contemplation of the same objects, but by decoding and recognition of the same objects, the same system of signs and the same hierarchy code of values' (Baudrillard, 2005/1970: 214).

Most entrepreneurs engaged in do-it-yourself strategies¹⁹, getting directly involved in the process of choosing colors, furniture and accessories. Baudrillard stated that 'the man who arranges [things] is neither the owner nor the simpler user, but an active agent that informs through ambiance. He uses the structure of distribution space and by controlling it he owns all the possibilities of mutual relationship and roles that objects can take' (1996: 17). In other words, those who contribute to creation of place, giving it a meaning through objects, select and form the basis of relationships that they want

to build with those who step into this space. For many teahouses, the interior space does not have a final form, but is 'aired just to be reused, reinvented, reinterpreted, and included in a different circuit' (V.S., trader²⁰). There are enough examples pointing in that direction: the walls are not decorated in order to be used for exhibitions; the tables and chairs can be reorganized and redistributed according to the size of the customers group; the terraces and the gardens change each year; the interior gardens are transformed by growing rose bushes, lavender or fig trees²¹.

The ambience is composed of furniture (with its two significances: the practical one and the other related to the imaginary, see Baudrillard, 1996: 18), tea boxes and accessories as well as books displayed for sale. The ambience is as an engine for sale, in the sense that communication is done by objects themselves. However, it is not the product itself which attracts the consumers, but rather the package, the box or the cover which are designed to communicate the content. A journalist wrote in that sense that 'you will not rush to leave the oasis of tranquility and beauty. As soon as you enter the store you will be impressed by the tea collection, stored in special boxes on an entire wall [...] The other corner of the room is furnished with all sorts of wonders for serving tea' (Mihaela Rotaru, journalist²²).

The color and light helps also to create the teahouse atmosphere. The colors register change from vivid, intense²³ to natural, pastel²⁴. In some teahouses I have noticed that the dominant color is red, while green and warm brown dominates in others.

In the teahouses where walls are not defined by colors or pictures, temporary exhibitions play an important role, by recreating the place, providing it with a different identity, a new portrait for a constantly changing environment²⁵. Light is also an important factor in teahouse place-making. Baudrillard has said about light that 'even when it does not lit from the ceiling [...] it remains the sign of a privileged intimacy, assigns objects with particular values, creates shadows and invents presences' (1996: 14). In teahouses' case, entrepreneurs have chosen to use less intrusive lighting. Candles and lamps are part of the props used to create intimate and warm atmosphere²⁶. Music is another element that helps create a warm ambience. An element often found in consumers' descriptions refers to soft music. It has a strong effect on the style in which the discussion between customers flows, facilitating quiet and undisturbing conversations.

Consumers' Experiences

One of the dimensions identified for teahouses' space is the escape from the violent stimuli encountered in the urban environment. Georg Simmel has stated that the large modern urban dwellers are subjected to external forces that contribute to the creation and proliferation of inner conflict, marked by a contradiction between 'the attempt of individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of

life' (1950/1903: 11) that is creeping into everyday life. From this point of view, teahouses are viewed by Bucharest inhabitants as spaces where they can meet friends in silence, appraising them as 'oasis of relaxation'²⁷. One such client stated that 'it is one of the most pleasant places in Bucharest and one of the few places that I and my friends feel at home. People are nice and the place offers the tranquility that all of us need in a hyperactive town full of boorishness'²⁸.

In addition to the violent stimuli escape, introspection facilitation is another dimension of consumers' experiences. It is not just an escape from a hectic place, but a return onto oneself. While the bustle of street blocks individual's relationship with oneself, this wall disappears when moving inside the teahouse. Several consumers mentioned that the noise that regularly distracts attention is blocked within the teahouse. The warm atmosphere allows thoughts to emerge more clearly, the body charges with energy²⁹ and the individual becomes calmer. Gilles Lipovetsky has also noted that 'in the race for fun things, more or less consciously homo consumericus tries to provide himself with an answer, even a superficial one, for the eternal question: who am I?' (2007: 36).

Through this type of consumption, the individual does not necessarily find the answer to this question directly. It does, however, allow for introspection. Individual can turn inwards onto themselves, escaping a bubbly, hyperactive, dusty, rough and raunchy world, as it is often described by many consumers. From this point of view we can consider that, to a certain measure, teahouses' spaces allow for

transcendental experiences. It is a dream space that calls for the multisensory experiences: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory. Teahouses space is thus a continuous transition between the sacred and the profane, with individuals alternating between these two spaces. If the profane domain is represented by the daily and dusty existence, these spaces allow the entrance into the sacre domain³⁰.

Aesthetics of everyday life is another component of the consumer experience. Discussing the role of aesthetics in daily life, Mike Featherstone has remarked that, in recent years, some urban subcultures spread under the motto of 'transforming daily life into a piece of art' (2007: 65). This process of beautification of life refers primarily to the increased number of images and signs that frame and complete the daily social life. One finds into the way in which tea consumption area are adjusted to this kind of needs, expressed by both entrepreneurs, as well as consumers.

Conclusions

Given that tea, for a large number of people, was and is still used as an adjunct in the treatment of certain diseases inside the confines of home, teahouses appear a departure from the mass, domestic consumption of tea. The entrepreneurs that approached, and to some extent, created this market, sought to offer not only tea, but also strong consumer experiences outside the home. For most of them the immediate goal was not to make a profit, but to provide, for both consumers and themselves, a quiet

place in which to develop their tea related passions, together with people who share similar life principles. Both the entrepreneurs and their clients are, in this context prosumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

Complementary to the economic relations of these activities, teahouses' owners have assumed as well the role of educating the taste of tea consumers. Compared with other countries with older traditions in this field, the preferences of Bucharest consumers are different. Therefore entrepreneurs developed both informal, as well as more organized means to educate consumers. These include, for instance, events and festivals dedicated to the consumption of tea. The existing tea offer still includes products for people who have not acquired sufficient taste in order to consume new, refined teas. This is the case of with the high 'pressure' created by a large number of consumers, who seek strong flavored teas and fruit blends.

Tea consumers are not only attracted by the products themselves, but also by the teahouses' and tea shops environment. Even if the sociodemographic characteristics vary and there is, evidently, heterogeneity among consumers, in terms of motivations one may identify certain groups. Thus, consumers are attracted by teahouses that offer a degree of insulation from the city's violent stimuli, thus allowing relaxation and dreaming. Moreover, by blocking external noise, the teahouses facilitate introspection, allowing individual to search for the answer that many hyperconsumers ask themselves *who am I?* (Lipovetsky, 2007). Other consumers use the teahouse' space

their daily work related activities, managing to work in a pleasant environment. Last, but not least, these areas facilitate the strengthening of friendship relations or mediate the creation of others, in both the romantic and professional sense.

The metamorphosis of tea from a simple adjunct to a means of socialization (through the creation of dedicated, non-domestic spaces) was performed in a 'quiet' manner. Whatever the reasons, consumers have been seduced by these spaces and their role in consumers' social life increased. It is, as William Roseberry (1996) has shown, a reconfiguration of market organization, consumption and cultural dynamics of social classes during the postmodern period.

Notes

¹ *Ziarul Financiar, Wall-Street, Money Express, Capital, Business Magazin, Magazinul Progresiv, Dilema Veche.*

² For example, *timp-liber.acasa.ro, metropotam.ro, raluk.ro și bucuresti.24fun.ro*. Traffic on these pages positioned them as the first answers to search on google.com.

³ For example, *greentea.ro, carturesti.ro, ceainarie.ro, ateliercafe.ro, laocanacuceai.ro, tea-house.ro, serendipity-tea.ro, mystictree.ro.*

⁴ For example, *ceainariatabiet.blogspot.com, c-arthe.blogspot.com.*

⁵ Interview.

⁶ Ștefan, Raluca. (1st August 2008). *Afaceri la o cană de ceai*. Wall-Street. Available on wall-street.ro, at 18.03.2010.

⁷ Interview.

⁸ CAEN Codes 2010. Available on codcaen.sinard.net, at 26.05.2010.

⁹ Revista Capital. (1st November 2005). *Ceainăria, o afacere mică destinată publicului cunoscător*. Available on capital.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹⁰ Interview.

¹¹ Nicolae, Rodica. (13th December 2006). *Fenomenul Cărturești*. Available on cariereonline.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹² Revista Capital. (1st November 2005). *Ceainăria, o afacere mică destinată publicului cunoscător*. Available on capital.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹³ Tabacu, Alina. (23rd March 2009). *Bernschutz & Co – o poveste cu aromă de ceai. Strategic*. Available on strategic.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹⁴ Saboff, Gabriela. (11th February 2010). *Interviu cu Alina Pescaru, managerul ceainăriei GreenTea*. Available on stiridebine.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹⁵ Ștefan, Raluca. (1st August 2008). *Afaceri la o cană de ceai. Wall-Street*. Available on wall-street.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹⁶ Tabacu, Alina. (23rd March 2009). *Bernschutz& Co – o poveste cu aromă de ceai. Strategic*. Available on strategic.ro, at 18.03.2010.

¹⁷ Posted by Manu. (8th June 2007). *Am fost pe acolo: Green Tea*. Available on metropotam.ro at 18.03.2010.

¹⁸ Rotaru, Mihaela. (24th August 2009). *Tea and Coffee Festival în București*. Available on timp-liber.acasa.ro, at 21.04.2010.

¹⁹ Interview.

²⁰ Interview.

²¹ Diaconu, Raluca. (6th April 2009). *Ceainăria La Metoc – grădina secretă din inima Bucureștiului*. Available on timp-liber.acasa.ro, at 18.03.2010.

²² Rotaru, Mihaela. (5th November

2009). *De unde cumpărăm ceai în București*. Available on timp-liber.acasa.ro, at 18.03.2010.

²³ Rotaru, Mihaela. (28th October 2009). *Ceainăria Rendezvous – ceai pentru o clipă de relaxare*. Available on timp-liber.acasa.ro, at 21.04.2010

²⁴ Georgescu, Magda. (18th March 2009). *Ceainăria Triangle d'Or – arta franceză a ceaiului*. Available on raluk.ro, at 18.03.2010.

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²⁶ Rotaru, Mihaela. (27th September 2009). *Gr dina Verona – terasa mediteranean   n inima Bucure tiului*. Available on timp-liber.acasa.ro, at 18.02.2010.

²⁷ Georgescu, Raluca. (1st March 2008). *Veda-Lounge – O lume a lui Eliade de lini te, romantism  i relaxare*. Available on raluk.ro at 18.03.2010.

²⁸ Posted by Manu. (8th June 2007). *Am fost pe acolo: Green Tea*. Available on metropotam.ro at 18.03.2010.

²⁹ Posted by Iulia, see Adriana's comment (13th February 2009). *Ceain rie: Hai la o can  cu ceai!* Available on metropotam.ro at 18.03.2010.

³⁰ Georgescu, Raluca. (1st March 2008). *Veda-Lounge – O lume a lui Eliade de lini te, romantism  i relaxare*. Available on raluk.ro at 18.03.2010.

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