We were transfixed by the little tea bushes planted for an agricultural experiment by a major tea producer. Having grown up on the Auburn University Experimental Station in Fairhope, Alabama, my family and I thought we had seen about anything that would grow in our area. We drank a molasses-like brew everyday that we called tea but none of us ever knew where tea came from. This tea planting was my first introduction to tea production, with bushes laid out in perfect rows and tagged with Chinese hybrid names — and then it all was blown sideways by Hurricane Frederic in 1979.

I acquired my first tea plants from one of the large burn piles, where the muddy plants had been pushed into a pile for destruction by a bulldozer. Three battered, unburned plants were rescued, planted together, and grew strong, along with my intense interest on tea production. I learned that the sturdy little plants were very competitive, crowding and shading out the toughest weeds, and were drought and freeze resistant.

I was not unfamiliar with camellias and greenhouse procedures. My father was a camellia enthusiast his entire career, and names like ‘Betty Sheffield’, ‘Purple Dawn’ and ‘Mathotiana Supreme’ were heard often around my house. One of my first money-making ventures was to root Camellia sasanqua in gallon cans to sell to grafters for a dollar. It was a natural beginning for me to learn tea propagation and production, but because of the slow growth rate, it took me years of trial and error to learn how to grow tea. I was soon to learn I was venturing into a little-publicized area.

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My wife and I first called our tea busi-
ness “Lyter Tea Company” for the country
road we live on, but people mistook that
to mean our tea was a lightly flavored
product. We then called it “Fairhope Tea
Company,” but people wanted to know
where we got our tea. One day a lady jok-
ingly said in her soft Southern tongue, “I’ll
bet you have a plantation,” which we do. So
now we call ourselves “Fairhope Tea Plan-
tation.” Having just about overworked my
wife, I occasionally hire helpers in the tea
fields. We have over 40,000 tea bushes, but
prune off most of the tea growth and make
around 100 pounds of tea a year. I make
my living as a museum director, so I do
not have to sell tea except for a hobby. It
could be my living because most everyone
likes tea, and I know few people who are
producing it. I have not produced packag-
ing or done any marketing besides word of
mouth. People find my tea, and I usually
sell out by Christmas each year.

We make several different kinds of
 teas. Fresh tea is made from fresh green
leaves put directly into the tea kettle. The
notion for us to make this was discovered
in an 18th-century publication recording
that a Buddhist monk highly anticipated
the first flush of spring when he would
brew the first pots with fresh green
leaves. You will only have this style
brewed in the first year and a half before being exposed
to the full sun. It took lots of trial and
error before I realized this. Tea grown
in the full sun has a more brisk, stout flavor
compared to the smoother, shade-grown
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A variety of soil types and compositions, but
the young plants have to be shaded the
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After a few years experimenting with
rooting and seedlings, I realized that dried
leaves do not make tea. Asking all over the
U.S. on just how to make tea, producers
would tell me to boil water and throw in
their tea bags. “No, how do you make the
tea” finally brought me an answer from
a company executive: “Look, son, it’s a
family and industrial secret and no one is
going to tell you how to make dry tea.”

It was the Chinese who taught me how
to produce tea. I first went to China in 1984
and visited highly developed, modern
factories and production areas in Buddhist
monasteries. Little by little they gave away
valuable technological secrets to the naive
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the blacking or fermenting process. The sun-dried product has silvery hairs on the buds that give it the name white. One tea parlor near us called this tea “The King Has No Clothes,” because of the light flavor and the high price.

Green tea is all the rage now. When I first learned how to make it, I produced little because I knew no one who would drink it. It is now 70% of what we make. We steam the dhool (picked green leaves) for heat treatment, then sun dry or maybe toast them lightly in an oven if drying weather conditions are not present. The finer, younger dhool is hand rubbed in an electric wok. This produces a gourmet green tea I am so proud of — I like to share this with family and friends and not sell it.

Oolong tea is an oxidized tea that is produced by the blacking process: a chemical reaction between enzymes produced in wilted leaves and tannic acid (phenol compounds) in the leaf. Oolong, which is a tea variety name applied to a style of tea the Chinese call pouchong, is only partly allowed to black. We control the rate of blacking with a limited wilting of the leaves or by a cooler temperature. This requires a real feel for the rate of the reaction. The tea is greenish with a smooth familiar taste of black tea.

Black tea is the tea most Americans know as an iced drink. I only know a few people who drink black tea by the cup. The flavor and color is produced by the phenylamerase enzymes produced by wilting, breaking tannins into flavonoids that do not exist in nature. We will beat up several bushels of withered dhool at a time and pack it in a large commercial styrofoam ice chest with a hot water bottle packed in to raise the temperature. Overnight the bright green leaves will turn copper red, a process the Chinese call “killing of the green.” Black tea can be made as strong as shoe polish but to me it is a bit flat compared to green tea. The flavors produced are not as stable as green tea, and black tea can become stale if not packed tightly from light and air. It is the tea most people request from us, so we keep making it.

During the mid 1990s, we started having tea parties out by the fields under oak trees draped in Spanish moss. We would set up tables and chairs, use linen table clothes, china and silver, in a pristine, natural setting. I would pick tea off the bushes there, demonstrate how it was made, then serve it with my wife’s homemade tea biscuits. These tea parties were very popular, attracting tour buses from many states across the South. My current job does not allow me to do this as I did when teaching school.

After those tea parties I would pour together the fresh, white, green and black tea from the gallon containers that was left over. We found this to be a wonderful blend. We now blend these in varying concentrations while brewing for family and social events.

We have been visited by many tea professionals, producers and technical representatives. One gentleman from New Hampshire was nice enough to lend us a bound copy of all the tea research done over the past 25 years at the Sri Lankan Tea Institute. This gave an extraordinary amount of information on agricultural techniques and processing controls.

Another visitor was a well known-French gourmet food TV channel host. She could not believe tea was growing in the United States. After sipping a cup, she said “It is a bit acrid, you do make it with bottled water, don’t you?” I replied “No,” pointing to my pump house, “I just pump it up out of the ground.” She muttered something about the “Dukes of Hazard,” then asked to buy a pound of black.