

Tea-Coffee

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As a child, my family gathered, along with much of the community, at my aunt's house. Her door was always open, and there was always someone about. And there was COFFEE. Always the coffee flowed, but not for us. Children were NOT allowed to have coffee. I remember my parents enjoying this drink, my aunts, grandfather, uncles, older cousins - in fact it seemed that all the adults drank endless cups of coffee. No matter how we begged, children could not have coffee. Gradually, some of the adults ceased to drink coffee but others seemed to drink even more. While my aunts never sat still without a coffee cup at their side, my younger brothers do not remember my father drinking coffee. Still, as children we longed to partake in the family staple – especially my younger brother. He begged for coffee.

One day we were home and dealing with the inevitable sniffles and sore throats of childhood. Mom gave us a cup of warm drink, not hot chocolate – hot chocolate was only allowed on special occasions – but something else. Mom would put a piece of ice in the cup so that we didn't burn our mouths, but she urged us to drink all we wanted. In the midst of cold winters where the sniffles kept us from playing outside or visiting anyone, we were privileged to enjoy our very own version of coffee. Yes, Mom said it was tea, but we knew no one who drank anything but sweet iced tea, so we named this drink Tea-Coffee.

Tea-Coffee saw us through many colds, flus, allergies, and cold winter afternoons. Eventually we were old enough to enjoy coffee and mostly abandoned Tea-Coffee. Yet whenever we were floored by a respiratory illness bad enough to send us to bed for days, we would ask for Tea-Coffee.

My last two years of high school I lost both grandmothers. Before I left home for college, I went through Mom's and both grandmothers' recipe boxes, copying the recipes I wanted for myself. I was surprised to find the recipe for Tea-Coffee was actually named Russian Tea. I definitely kept this recipe – a combination of normal tea, orange juice, lemonade, cloves, and cinnamon (no wonder we were encouraged to drink it when we were sick!).

I shared this beverage with my college roommates when the cold weather would get us down. Long evenings of studying were lightened by Tea-Coffee. Of course we eventually worried about the calories and began exploring other teas, but it was Tea-Coffee that was the most comforting. I made it when I was a boarder as a co-op student far from home. After getting married, I introduced this drink to my husband, but he iced it – warm beverages of any kind were not his thing!

My young family moved from Georgia, to Florida, to Cincinnati and eventually to North Carolina. I don't remember making Tea-Coffee in Florida unless it was the one time we got a

few flakes of snow, a very rare occasion! In Cincinnati, the number of days spent dealing with sniffles seemed to be endless. I found myself making Tea-Coffee regularly. My oldest child did not care for it, but enjoyed helping me prepare an instant version to give as Christmas gifts to the play-group Moms. However, this child insisted the name on the recipe card – Russian Tea – was the proper label. In North Carolina this beverage saw us through many winters. My home was often filled with children and their moms. As children played in the backyard, we would enjoy Russian Tea through the cold winter afternoons.

A younger child grew to rely on this beverage as a staple. It was a comfort food for the many times allergies and asthma plagued childhood. As time passed the necessity to control health through exercise, diet, and rest became evident. Working as a Barista and as a bar-tender in college did not prevent the inevitable call asking for the recipe for Russian Tea.

Several years later we were discussing the pros and cons of the drink and I was presented with an adamant defense that the benefits of this beverage far outweighed any perceived drawbacks from the sugar. Orange juice and lemonade provided vitamin C which is well known to aid respiratory healing. The combination of cloves and cinnamon provided lots of healing qualities. And tea was the carrier allowing the increase of liquid that is always the first advice when one deals with a respiratory condition. Unfortunately, the complete loss of smell that accompanies COVID made it difficult to enjoy the go-to drink as my child fought the pandemic illness in isolation. Still plenty of Russian Tea was provided when the spouse was laid low with the virus.

My younger brother, who so desperately wanted coffee, enjoyed Tea-Coffee. His wife and children came to rely on it every winter at Granny's house – not as a healing beverage to overcome illness, but as a comforting deliciousness that warmed the body and soul made by his mom. It is interesting that the recipes have diverged and Mom's spiced tea, as my sister-in-law calls it, tastes different from mine. Yet the basics remain the same and it is a winter staple of our homes. The sugar and spice of fruit infused tea brings comfort and healing on many levels as we enjoy the quietness of winter evenings - whether together or apart, it calls us home.