Tea culture lives at Hangzhou expo

Upcoming event to showcase city’s legacy as hub for traditional Chinese beverage

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Tea sellers are preparing to release their pre-Qin grilling tea varieties, the best tea collected in early April, in anticipation of the upcoming 2012 China West Lake International Tea Culture Expo, which is set to once again bring out the best of tea culture in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, said local officials.

Tea and its related customs have been involved in shaping and developing the city’s key features for 1,500 years. Among its celebrated types of tea, Longjing, the Dragon Well Tea, is the most renowned and popular.

Once the tea is soaked in fresh-boiled water, a sweet fragrance rises out. Its leaves bloom like flower buds and bounce slightly up and down, which makes the brewing process itself a sight to behold.

Hangzhou is an inseparable part of the city’s cultural legacy, said local leaders. One of the most famous pieces of folklore related to Longjing tea is a tale about an emperor, Qianlong, who reigned from 1736 to 1796, visited Hangzhou.

It was at that time that Longjing tea became a household name. The local legends tell that the emperor randomly picked and drank some tea leaves from the tea plants he saw there the “Royal Trees” and had the tea farmers bring him more. He was pleased and named the tea trees after him and made friends with a girl who was busy gathering tea leaves there, he stayed for tea.

Some even suspect that Longjing was produced by monks centuries ago who knew and explored ways to brew the tea from fresh leaves. It is also believed that the Japanese tea-making traditions, including Cha-dō, the tea ceremony, were based on and inspired by customs in the Hangzhou temples.

History has it that Japanese monks came to a temple at the city’s Longjing Mountain to learn about Buddhists between 12th and 13th century, when Hangzhou was the capital.

They brought back not only Buddhist learning but also tea culture and a white tea service set, from which they developed their own.

When shipping began on the Grand Canal connecting Beijing to Hangzhou, tea culture became popular outside of temples and was introduced into ordinary households in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907). The canal helped boost the tea trade and made Hangzhou wealthy.

Soon after, tea became a national beverage, and tea houses began sprouting throughout the city. In the Song Dynasty (AD 960-479), the city was already full of teahouses. Teahouses at the time had varying levels of service tailored to different types of customers, according to historian Zhang Xuepeng.

Once the tea is brewed, it is served with a variety of Chinese food. The tea-drinking ceremony includes the tea ceremony, tea breaking, and tea stirring. In marriage ceremonies, betrothal gifts and the dowry are named after tea. Tea is even a part of the Spring Festival sacrifice, whereas liquor is used in other cities.

Tracing tea culture

It is not difficult to see the evidence of tea culture within the city. A list of must-sees in and around the city has been either production areas for fine tea and high-quality mountain water or places where legendary figures have stayed for tea.

Hangzhou has always been a famous haunt for intellectuals and poets. According to local tales, the best of ancient poets, Bai Juyi, a Tang Dynasty and Su Shi in Song Dynasty, stayed at the city’s teahouses, where they talked about Buddhism and drinking tea.

The place they stayed became famous, both for the scenery and for the writings left there. Near an old dragon well, there are still inscriptions said to be left by Su Shi. The poet stayed in Hangzhou for many years. The place is named after him and made friends with a Buddhist master.

Tea is also central to Hangzhou cuisine, as exemplified by the dish Stir Fried Shrimp with Longjing Tea. It is regarded as China’s national beverage. Teahouses are a popular spot for tea lovers in Hangzhou.

Tea is considered a universal tea experience tour, a high-end special tour and a rural leisure tour.

The annual tea expo is sponsored by the Hangzhou city government, the China International Tea Culture Research Association, the China Tea Society and the Hangzhou Tea Culture Research Association.

The upcoming expo will emphasize local characteristics by holding many tea cultural activities.

Tea expo will become an event for a number of special activities in Hangzhou, including a teahouse management conference, a tea-stirring contest, a tea cultural experience festival, tea fair and tea fair. There is also a tour package combining a universal tea experience tour, a high-end special tour and a rural leisure tour.

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