

Assam, India Tea Adventure 2022

Hookmol Tea Company – Dibrugarh



Bhaskar Hazarika, Director, L K Tea Company, is what is known as a “mover and a shaker” in Assam's tea world. The day we talked with him in his backyard tearoom, he came from his tea factory wearing loose slacks, a knit shirt and sneakers and he served us tea. Just ten days later he is spiffed up in a suit and serving on the Panel Discussion on Impact of Regulatory Environment for Growth and Innovation for the India Policy Institute. I'm surprised he has time to manage his tea factory that consistently produces the award-winning CTC Hookmol tea. Actually, when we visited the Tasting Room at the Auction Center



in Guwahati the example of an outstanding tea was from Hookmol and they told us he was dedicated to making high quality tea. At his home in Diskar Village Bhaskar designed and built his traditional bamboo tearoom himself and confided it's his favorite place to relax with a cup of his own tea.



He never expected to be in the tea business when he moved to the US, earned an engineering degree, and worked in the Silicon Valley. In 2009 his father started a tea garden and asked Bhaskar to return to India. He jumped right in and tried to start a tea factory, but it took him four years to navigate the red tape. During that waiting time he worked at acquiring tea gardens to add to those of his dad. He admits his first tea was not so tasty, but he persevered and now his Hookmol tea is consistently in the top 2-3% and often the number one seller at the auctions. But he has

higher aspirations. The 42-year-old entrepreneur is steadily working to reform Assam's tea industry. He believes India can produce much more than commodity tea. Baskar gifted us each a bag of his 2nd flush CTC tea and I left him with a copy of my Texas Afternoon Tea Cookbook.



Before enjoying tea in his tearoom, we had a visit to the factory where he produces Single Estate, Un-blended Premium BOP Grade Loose Tea. He processes the leaves using the CTC machinery. CTC processing was introduced in India in the 1930s. The rotating blades were sharp and exposed. Evidently the factory workers were afraid of the machines. But this modern factory is a busy place, and every worker is on task. It's obvious that Bhaskar and his employees are proud of the work happening there Below is my nonprofessional take on what happens in Bhaskar's factory not knowing the proper names of the machinery. On the back of this page are photos from the factory showing the procedure.



- The process starts with tea plucking at the gardens. Bhaskar told me that he has some permanent employees but most of his workers are short term, especially the tea pluckers. The fresh leaves are brought from his gardens to an area outside the factory where they are fluffed and spread into withering troughs.

- After withering, the soft pliable leaves are put in bags and attached to a conveyor belt which takes them inside the factory. A worker sits atop a large funnel and dumps the leaves into it where they are pushed into a rotorvane machine and onto a conveyor belt with spreaders for the CTC to begin.
- The leaves move along the belt through a series of sharp rollers that crush and tear the leaves into a kind of mush.
- The roller machine turns the mush into small pellets. Bhaskar does not use this machine, so his tea is shaped more like the traditional small, flat shards.
- Onward they move to the continuous oxidation machine where they finally start to turn brown and then on to the big dryer where oxidation stops, and the excess water is removed.
- The dried tea is now in various sizes from dust to larger pieces. It moves on to a sorter which has a series of vibrating screens where the tea is sorted into four grades from dust to BOP. At several intervals are small troughs with bags beneath them and the tea is pushed into the appropriate bag as it moves along the belt.
- The grades of tea can be packaged alone or may be combined for special blends. Bhaskar pointed out that the Muslims prefer a blend of the BOP (Highest/Biggest Grade) and the Dust (Lowest/Smallest Grade) because this gives them a brew with a quick infusion but a strong flavor.
- The tea is then funneled and sometimes literally shoveled into bulk bags and weighed before being stored for shipping. Bhaskar is in the process of expanding his factory to make the packaging and weighing process more efficient. WJEW.



