

# YERBA MATE: THE ANCIENT DRINK OF HEALTH AND FRIENDSHIP

## WHAT IS MATE?

Mate is South America's famous green tea which has won worldwide admiration because of its special energizing and nutritional qualities, as well as its unique delicious flavor. Today Mate is consumed by millions of South Americans as an all occasion drink, occupying a position like that of coffee in the US or tea in Britain and China.

## YERBA MATE: ORIGIN & HISTORY

YERBA MATE is a medicinal and cultural drink of ancient origins. It is made from the leaves of a holly (*Ilex Paraguariensis*) plant harvested in pre-hispanic times along the Parana-Paraguay river system. It is a plant typical of the Alto Paraná region, Alto Uruguay region and the Argentine NE. It grows wild in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Brazil, but is most abundant in Paraguay where it is also cultivated.

In the wild, the plant needs about 25 years to develop completely, reaching in that case a height of up to 15 meters. The leaves are evergreen, 7-11 cm long and 3-5.5 cm wide, with a serrated margin. The flowers are small, greenish-white, with four petals. The fruit is a red berry 4-6 cm in diameter. It flowers between the months of October and December.

It is a tropical or subtropical plant, needing high temperatures, high humidity and up to 1500 mm of annual rain. On average, 300,000 tons of Mate are produced each year.

The plant is classified vaguely, according to Western herbal medicine, as aromatic, stimulant, bitter, aperient (laxative), astringent, diuretic, purgative, sudorific (sweat inducing), and febrifuge (fever reducing). Mate contains numerous vitamins and minerals.

This caffeinated drink has never reached the commercial distribution that cacao has, although Early Spanish settlers along the river system had taken up the pre-Colombian practice of drinking wild YERBA MATE as tea in the 1600's. They acquired the habit from the people they conquered. Spanish colonization efforts were tied closely to Jesuit missionization efforts. Jesuit policy encouraged large-scale plantation agriculture, using indigenous labor to produce marketable commodities, and make the missions self-sufficient and profitable. It was developed as a crop to serve the colonies.

Realizing the economic potential, Jesuits successfully planted YERBA MATE at their missions. It made its way down the Parana-Paraguay system eventually becoming a popular social drink throughout Argentina, the Andes, Upper Peru, Montevideo and Southern Brazil. After the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish colonies the cultivation on the missions ended. YERBA MATE was the only caffeine crop ever harvested commercially from wild stands in large quantities.

When it is harvested, the branches are sometimes dried with a wood fire, which imparts a smoky flavor. Then the leaves and twigs are broken up. There are many brands and types of YERBA MATE: with twigs, without twigs, with low powder content, "softly" flavored, and blends flavored with orange, mint and grapefruit skin.

Many companies are now claiming they have ORGANIC YERBA MATE also.

## EL MATE: THE BASICS

The act of drinking MATE is a highly, stylized, ritualistic process, requiring:

\* the YERBA MATE, which are green dried leaves and stemlets of the perennial tree which originates from Paraguay, but is grown extensively in Argentina. The herb contains about 1% caffeine. Its most popular form comes in 500 gram (17.6 oz.) bags of loose-leaf tea that is dried and ground.

\* a hollow gourd, originally dried and decorated, EL MATE. The name "MATE" derives from the QUECHUA name "MATI" for the gourd; the mate is usually decorated

\*a metal filter-straw, LA BOMBILLA, with a strainer on the end, which can range from purely functional (made from bamboo) to the elaborately crafted (made from silver)

\*hot water

The modern MATE drinker can choose any number of ways to extract the beneficial tea from the herb. In some places it is available in tea bags, called MATE COCIDO, but these do not provide the strength and full benefit of the more traditional methods for drinking it. It can be made into a flavorful iced tea to drink on a hot summer day, but hands down, the best way to reap its benefit is to use your MATE cup and bombilla; following in the foot steps of the ancients by sipping MATE the traditional way.

#### EL MATE: HOW TO "CURE" THE MATE GOURD

The MATE infusion MUST be prepared using a cured mate.

The curing process serves two purposes: it adapts the MATE to the kind of infusion for which it is going to be used. The MATE develops a "memory" of the taste and therefore becomes able to impart an aged taste and, it removes the soft tissues from the inside of the gourd.

\*Fill the gourd two-thirds of the way with YERBA MATE.

Use pure yerba only. Fill to the rim with COLD water.

Let it sit for 3-4 days.

\*Rinse the gourd, WITH WATER ONLY. NEVER use soap on the gourd. Remove/scrape any remaining tissues. Rinse gourd until water runs clean.

#### YERBA MATE: THE PROCESS

\*WATER: do not BOIL the water for your mate, heat it up to just before boiling (about 80 degrees celsius).

Argentines use PAVAS (special tea kettle) to serve their MATES, but any tea kettle will do.

\*EL MATE (the gourd): fill it up two-thirds of the way with the YERBA. Place your hand over the mouth of the MATE and shake it up a few times. Remove your hand and you will find a powder residue from the MATE. Place the BOMBILLA into the gourd until it reaches the bottom of the gourd, covering the mouthpiece with your thumb. Pour hot water into one side of the gourd into the gourd. Let it stand a few seconds and replenish with hot water when the previous is absorbed by the dry MATE leaves. Take care not to wet the whole surface of the mate leaf. This pouring procedure is called "CEBAR" in Argentina, and it is considered an art by the aficionados of mate.

\*The server (EL CEBADOR) sucks the MATE water out of the gourd through the BOMBILLA, taking several good sips until air is heard coming through the bombilla.

Once done, the server will again fill the cup with hot water and hand it to the next drinker, who will also drink the entire contents of the cup before handing it back to the server. The cup will once

again be filled and handed to the next person, who does the same. This process will continue, going around the circle many times, until there is no flavor left in the infusion. You drink and replenish the Maté with hot water many times until the liquid comes out with almost no taste.

The repetitive extraction with hot water seems to be an efficient way of extracting the beneficial properties of the herb.

Some may worry that such an intimate sharing is unsanitary. It probably is, but no more than kissing.

It is precisely this fact that makes sharing the Mate into such an intense friendship event. You don't share it with the casual friend. You share it with those with whom you would share your soul. Mate friendships are the best kind of friendships to have. When the water is gone, a slurping noise (totally acceptable) will be heard and the gourd will be refilled by the server and passed to the next person in the group.

When that person finishes, the gourd is handed back to the server for another refill. This rotating process of sharing is what makes the ACT OF DRINKING MATE a moment of intimacy for those present.

\* There are some regional differences in how it is consumed. It can be sweetened with sugar or honey, which purists scorn, and in Paraguay and Northwest Argentina it is consumed ice-cold (TERERÉ) or with lemonade. Other fresh herbs can be added to the YERBA MATE, like mint, for example. Some replace the water with milk, especially for the children.

Enjoy! Although the first taste will be an unusual flavor for newcomers, it is a haunting taste that beckons you back time and time again. It's almost as if the body knows how good Maté is for you and calls out for you to take in more.

#### YERBA MATE: THE GUARANI LEGEND

Guarani tribes of Paraguay worked the land and became excellent craftsmen. They believed that the tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, bearded God (Pa'i Shume) who descended from the skies, unlocked the secrets of health and medicine for them. Pa'i Shume revealed the healing qualities of native plants and taught them sound agricultural practices. One of the most important of these secrets was how to harvest and prepare the leaves of the YERBA MATE tree. The MATE INFUSION was meant to ensure health, vitality and longevity.

Guarani would clear the forest, plant MANDIOCA (manioc) and CHOCHO (corn), but after four or five years the soil would be worn out and the tribe had to move on. Tired of moving, an old Guarani refused to go. The youngest of his daughters, Jary stayed with her father. This gesture of love deserved a prize. One day, a shaman arrived and asked Jary what she wanted in order to feel happy. The girl asked for nothing, but the old man said, "I want strength to go on and to help reunite Jary with the tribe."

The shaman gave the old man a very green plant, perfumed with kindness, and told him to plant it, pick the leaves, dry them on fire, grind them and put the pieces in a gourd, add hot or cold water and sip the infusion. The shaman left saying "In this new beverage you will find healthy company, even in the sad hours of the cruelest solitude."

Thus was born the "ka-á" beverage (MATE) that the white people would later adopt and call YERBA MATE in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Uruguay and Paraguay. In Brazil, it is called chimarrao.

Sipping the green sap, helped the old man recover and resume their long journey towards his kinsmen. The whole tribe adopted the habit of drinking the green herb, bitter or sweet, that gave strength and courage.

MATE became the most common ingredient in household cures of the Guarani, and remains so to this day. In Argentina, a TGI consumer survey reports that 92% of Argentine households consume YERBA MATE. Given the consumption rate, it is clearly a phenomenon that spans all socio-economic levels and is a very democratic national TRADITION. It is more a daily ritual than a simple drink. Its use has also been introduced into Lebanon and Syria, particularly among the Druze minority.

#### YERBA MATE: CHEMICAL COMPOSITION, NUTRITIONAL PROPERTIES AND EFFECTS

The beneficial and therapeutic aspects of yerba mate verified after centuries of observations and use, were lately confirmed by numerous scientific studies. As to its chemical properties, yerba mate is similar to green tea, though much more nutritious. Significant quantities of potash, sodium and magnesium are present in the leaves as well as the infusion. (Tenorio Sanz, Torija Isasa 1991).

Vitamins B-1, B-2, A, riboflavin, carotene, colin, pantothenic acid, inositol and 15 types of aminoacids (F. Alikaridis 1987) are also contained.

These, as well as the presence of eleven polyphenols (Kawakami, A. Kabayashi 1991) are some of the components that make yerba mate a very healthy drink. Recent studies indicate that polyphenols are powerful antioxidants that strengthen the organism's natural defences, and protect it against the cellular destruction that cause physical deterioration and the development of sicknesses. (J. Carper 1988).

Mateine, a chemical substance from the family of the xanthines, is also contained in yerba mate. Its chemical structure is similar to that of caffeine, but with different effects on the body. Even though mateine, as caffeine, is a stimulant of the central nervous system and a promoter of mental activity, it is different from the later as it does not interfere with sleeping patterns. And contrarily to other xanteins, mateine is also a smooth diuretic. Regarding the effects of yerba mate, changes in behaviour such as an increase in energy and vitality are also observed, as well as an increased capacity of concentration, reduction of nervousness and increased resistance to mental and physical fatigue. An improvement of mood, specially in cases of depression, frequently occurs as a result of its use (D. Mowrey 1991). Apart from providing essential minerals to the body, such a potash, sodium and magnesium, yerba mate retards the accumulation of lactic acid in muscles.

This turns it into an excellent natural energizer for people that practice sports or other physical activities (D. Mowrey 1991) .

YERBA MATE is suppose to have powers such as MENTAL STIMULATION, FOCUS and ALERTNESS reminiscent of stimulants, FATIGUE REDUCTION, STRESS REDUCTION, APPETITE SUPPRESSANT, DIURETIC, BOOSTS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM, BLOOD DETOXIFICATION, TONING OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, and PRESERVATION OF YOUTH. In most of these South American countires it is rare to find an OBESE person, being that mate is sipped throughout the day.

Studies of MATE, though limited, have shown preliminary evidence that YERBA MATE effects muscle tissue, as opposed to the central nervous system, which most other caffeinated plants effect. The net amount of caffeine in one preparation of YERBA MATE is typically quite high, in part because the repeated filling of the MATE with hot water is able to extract the highly-soluable xanthines extremely effectively.

It is for this reason, that one MATE may be shared among several people and yet produce the desired stimulating effect on all of them.

Of the 196 volatile chemical compounds found in Yerba Mate, 144 are also found in tea. The infusions of *Ilex paraguayensis* are less astringent than those made of tea.

An August 11, 2005 U.S. patent application (document #20050176777 & #20030185908) cites YERBA MATE as a 40-50% inhibitor of MAO activity. A monoamine oxidase inhibitor is a type of ANTIDEPRESSANT, so there is some data to suggest that YERBA MATE has a calming effect in this regard.

YERBA MATE has won many admirers in wide-ranging parts of the world. In the search for a natural stimulant devoid of side effects and toxicity, YERBA MATE holds the most hope. An invigorator of the mind and body, a natural source of nutrition, and a health promoter, YERBA MATE is a product with unquestionable qualities.