

THE ART OF SELF-CARE

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAT KERR

A few years ago, Stephanie Yvette Evans was sitting in a tea shop when she had a revelation. As a professor of Black women's studies at Georgia State University near this tea shop in Atlanta, Georgia, Stephanie researches black women's wellness practices throughout history. She had written about yoga and wine as wellness practices for Black women, and now she was noticing striking similarities between the cultures of those practices and the culture of tea.

"I began to ask how Black women around the world, including [well-known] women like Rosa Parks and Naomi Osaka, used tea as a means of self-care and mental health maintenance," Stephanie wrote in an academic article published this year, reflecting on that revelatory moment at a tea shop called Just Add Honey. "After asking the question, 'What have Black women in the African diaspora written about tea and health?', I found very complicated, intriguing, and useful answers."

Her subsequent research led her to 320 Black women's first-person narratives of tea, recorded over more than 150 years and across 40 countries. For instance: Tea and herbal infusions were essential treatments in doctress Mary Seacole's toolkit while she was caring for soldiers in the Crimean War. During a 1953 concert tour in Japan, opera singer Marian Anderson sought opportunities to learn about Japanese culture by experiencing sadō.

In the White House kitchen garden, First Lady Michelle Obama grew chamomile flowers that were dried and packed in sachets to be steeped, which became gifts for visiting dignitaries.

Each of those memoirs is unique, of course. But Stephanie has been able to broadly classify their themes into six areas of wellness:

Mental: Tea was used to relax or treat anxiety and depression.

Physical: Tea was used to treat colds, reproductive issues, and many other ailments.

Spiritual: Tea was associated with certain rituals and traditions in Christianity, Judaism, Indigenous practices, and others.

Social: Tea was a key feature of gatherings, celebrations, and meetings.

Economic: Black women produced tea in oppressive circumstances (enslavement; colonisation) but tea also has led them to prosperity (business ownership; unionising).

Political: Tea was served at political meetings and in other instances of activism.

The memoirs are from Black women all over the world, but Stephanie is particularly well-positioned to do this kind of research in Atlanta. As the largest city in the US South, Atlanta's distinctly rich Black history has unfolded over centuries, and it has been known as the cradle of the civil rights movement.

So while Stephanie researches Black women's connections to tea throughout time and space, she is situated in a place where that history's legacy is easily observed. Of the thirteen cafes and retailers I've encountered in the Atlanta area that specialise in loose-leaf tea, ten of those businesses are owned or co-owned by Black women. With a few of these women's narratives in focus, we can see how tea was not critical *only* for Black women's *historical* wellness — it's still often central to their wellness today.

Social wellness: Tea for relationships

Brandi Shelton is the owner of Just Add Honey, the tea shop where Stephanie first felt inspired to start researching Black women's tea practices. I visited Just Add Honey when summer was in full swing. The sweltering, sticky air of this season, combined with the heat emanating from urban architecture, infamous road traffic, and the world's busiest airport, are how 'Hot-lanta' got its nickname. So I gladly accept Brandi's recommendation for the special drink of the month: a refreshing iced black tea steeped in rosemary and mint, sweetened with local blueberry jam, balanced with tart lemonade, and topped off with edible glitter. It pays homage to classic Southern sweet tea (black iced tea, often slow-brewed in the sun, and mixed with heaps of cane sugar) — but elevates it with a modern and elegant spin.

While Brandi gathers the ingredients to prepare the drink, I'm curious to see who else has chosen to spend their Sunday morning here. I overhear three women in dresses and heels at a nearby table, swapping stories over iced teas and a three-tiered tray of pastries. Near the front door, a mother selects a jar of loose leaf tea from a shelf on the wall, takes off the lid, and lowers it so her primary-school-age daughter can smell the leaves. A young couple, maybe university students, are holding each other's hands while they browse a menu near the order counter. Meanwhile, a host of employees are shuffling in and out of the service area and each one seems to be on a particular mission, whether taking orders, making drinks, or talking to a customer about a certain tea of interest.

When Brandi talks about Just Add Honey, she emphasises the organic community that has grown around the brick-and-mortar shop after she transitioned from her early days of only popup events.



“When we initially opened retail, it was because we wanted to meet our customers in real time,” Brandi says. “We wanted to engage with them; we wanted to have a cup of tea across from the person.”

Sitting in the shop now, I’m seeing first-hand how that vision has succeeded. The atmosphere is dynamic and energised — markedly different from the subdued tea places I visit most often, where a quiet and delicate environment fosters a meditative feeling. In contrast with those spaces designed for individual contemplation, Just Add Honey is designed for socialising, being seen, and being heard.

Brandi tells me a story that could easily fit among the memoirs Stephanie researches. Last Christmas Eve, there was a rare freeze warning in Atlanta. Brandi considered closing the shop early, but she couldn’t because customers just kept coming in droves to stock up on tea for the holiday. The staff was spread thin, trying to give adequate attention to every customer’s questions and requests. But Brandi noticed some of the regular customers stepping in to assist the less-familiar ones, educating them about the different teas and helping them make their choices.

“It was beautiful to watch,” Brandi says. “[The customers] literally were repeating things that we had told them weeks or months ago.”

Physical wellness: Tea for strength

A few kilometres east of Just Add Honey is another loose-leaf tea shop, Jayida Ché, which translates to “good tea” from Arabic. Aleathia Saleem opened Jayida Ché in 2016, fulfilling a decades-old promise she had made to her niece, Mariyah Sabir, that she would someday open a tea shop. Mariyah joined her as co-founder of the business.

When Mariyah was a toddler, she had her first asthma attack, which required emergency surgery and a three-week stay in the hospital. It was a wake-up call for the whole family.

“We realised we can’t be reactive,” Aleathia says. “We started learning more ways to be proactive and very intentional about how we lived our lives.”

The family became more interested in natural remedies such as teas and herbal infusions in combination with Western medicine for a comprehensive approach to physical health. This lifestyle became the basis for the concept of Jayida Ché. Herbal blends with mostly organic ingredients such as turmeric



for anti-inflammation, mint for digestion, and raspberry leaf for circulation are crafted for their physical wellness properties. Jayida Ché also offers blending and wellness workshops as a starting point for customers who want to learn more about how teas and tisanes can support their health.

Aleathia and Mariyah teach their customers that while these teas and tisanes do not serve as a panacea, they can have powerful benefits when combined with professional health advice from a physician and a commitment to prioritising health in all areas.

“When we talk to our customers here about those herbs and how you can benefit from them, we can go deeper and deeper into [that], but we also want them to understand it’s a lifestyle,” Mariyah says. “It’s about what you’re eating, your community, your friends, what’s in your household.”

Through classes and regular daily interactions with customers, Aleathia and Mariyah offer ideas for transitioning to healthier alternatives with tea. They might suggest a fruity herbal blend instead of a sugary fruit punch, or they might encourage someone to drink some hot tea for digestive purposes *before* the sweet Southern iced tea that they have always loved.

“It’s the things that you may have been raised on, but healthier ... those are the things that honour our Atlanta kind of vibe,” Mariyah says. “All my friends who come will say, ‘This is something my mum or grandma would have made.’”

The many dimensions of tea and wellness

Although these snapshots demonstrate how social wellness is synonymous with Just Add Honey and physical wellness is front-of-mind at Jayida Ché, the reality is that neither tea shop is so one-dimensional. From talking with Brandi, Aleathia, and Mariyah, and hearing from some of their customers, it’s clear that all six categories of wellness from Stephanie’s research — mental, physical, spiritual, social, economic, and political — are relevant to each place.

Nor does Atlanta’s tea scene have a one-dimensional cultural context. With several Black-owned tea shops in Atlanta and elsewhere in Georgia, Stephanie describes the state’s Black tea culture as robust, with room to grow. But it’s not *only* for Black women. There are cultures around the world that have their own tea and herbal traditions, and many of those traditions are still active now. The greater Atlanta area has been on a major trajectory of change and diversification over the last few decades, and as that continues, these many tea traditions will converge here.

“Everybody has a tea story,” Stephanie says. “The concentrated ownership of tea shops demonstrates that [the tea scene here] is thriving, but it’s not overt. And I’m hoping to change that. Everybody needs to talk about tea.” ●

