

Flavor of South America

Cups of herbal tea are as much a refreshment as a social encounter

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By BLANE BACHELOR / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay – As the bus wound through the curved streets of this capital city, cameras snapped nonstop, trying to capture the beauty of the late-afternoon sun reflecting off the Río de la Plata.

It was a lovely scene, but what really caught my attention were the round, cuplike objects gripped in the palms of everyone on the streets: old men chatting with one another, teenagers swaggering in their cliques, couples out for an afternoon stroll. I smiled as one of my travel companions noticed, too: "What in the world are they holding?"

I knew – those mysterious little objects were hollowed-out gourds, filled with perhaps the most coveted drink in this part of South America: *maté* (MAH-tay). The bitter tea, whose name derives from the Quechua word for "cup," is as steeped into the culture in countries such as Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil as *gauchos*, the tango and *fútbol*.

Made from yerba, a derivative of the holly plant grown only in South America, *maté* is gaining popularity in the United States. Hailed for its antioxidant and immune-boosting properties, as well as relatively low caffeine levels, *maté* is available in coffee shops, organic stores and even national grocery chains.

In South America, however, *maté* is much more about tradition than trend. It's a ritual, a custom that links the generations, bridges class divisions and intrigues first-time travelers to the region.

Drinking tea South-American style isn't anything like the British version, with its scones, saucers and dainty social trappings. Nor does it involve the structured formality in many Asian cultures. You can have *maté* anywhere, anytime, with anyone. The essence is interaction with others, without regard to social status or personal differences.

"*Maté* makes everyone equal, it communicates, it mixes, and it joins without giving consideration to honors, titles, or virtues," writes Fernando Assunção in *El Maté*, a comprehensive book about every aspect of the tea.

To prepare a cup, the yerba – a loose mix of ground-up leaves and stems – is packed into a small, hollowed-out object, usually a gourd but sometimes a horn or ceramic cup, and steaming water is poured over the top. After steeping for a minute or two, the tea is sipped through a metal straw, called the *bombilla*. If it's being drunk in a group, the gourd is passed clockwise from person to person. *Maté* is so widely consumed in cities such as

Montevideo that it's difficult to walk down the street without seeing someone with a cup in hand or a thermos tucked under an arm.

I first tried *maté* in Barcelona. Some newfound friends from Argentina and Uruguay took me along to watch their buddy Fernando play rugby one Saturday in early spring. During the train ride to the match, I watched, transfixed, as Fernando prepared his *maté*, packing the gourd with what looked like dirt and crushed weeds and soaking it with steaming water from his thermos. He took constant sips from the thin metal straw that poked out of the concoction like a submarine's periscope.

"*Es maté*," Fernando explained when he caught me staring at him. "Try it," he said, passing me the cup.

I took a sip, the hot tea nipping my tongue and filling my mouth with what I imagined liquefied bark would taste like. My friends cracked up at the grimace on my face. "It's very bitter," my friend Clara said.

Bitter or not, the *maté* warded off the afternoon's chill, and I felt a sense of camaraderie in passing the gourd and sharing sips from the *bombilla*. I felt like an honorary South American, invited to share in their longtime custom.

Three years later, during my trip to Uruguay and Argentina, I felt a surge of fondness when I saw the familiar little gourds again. And when an artist in Punta del Este, Uruguay's popular beach spot, passed me his *maté* as I commented on his beautifully decorated cups, the taste was as bitter as I remembered.

I asked the artist what he crafted his cups from, picking up a quirky one sitting jauntily on a small quartz hoof and covered in smooth white and tan hair.

"That one," he said, brown eyes twinkling in his deeply creased face, "is made from a bull's testicle. It would make an excellent souvenir." I gasped and nearly dropped it but couldn't help joining in his good-natured laughter.

In Uruguay's quaint coastal town of Colonia, I asked Gustavo, a musician and artist, about the *maté* he was drinking. Minutes later, he invited me inside his tiny house to have a look around his shop, from which he sold his paintings and beautifully carved gourds.

When I asked a street vendor in Montevideo about the differences in the *bombillas* on his table, he demonstrated how certain designs were easier to unscrew and clean. In Buenos Aires, I shopped endlessly for the perfect *matés* to buy as gifts – by this point, I understood that the word also referred to the cups or gourds in which the tea is served. We contemplated whether to choose the traditional round ones or those called *galletas* for their shape like a thick cookie.

In the United States, my favorite coffee shop now offers *maté* among its tea selections. The first time I ordered it, I was surprised by its mild orangey flavor. But if I had my

choice, I'd rather have it bitter next time – and served in a gourd, along with a *bombilla* and the promise of a personal connection as warm as the tea itself.

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WHEN YOU GO

FINDING MATÉ

As much as you'll see maté on the streets in South America, you won't find it on any restaurant menus. Grocery stores sell bags of loose leaves, and gourds and bombillas are readily available in stores and through street vendors and artists. Prices of the gourds and bombillas vary, depending on the quality and materials used. A traditional set will run about \$1.50 to \$5, but the most elaborate ones, crafted from precious metals, can cost hundreds of dollars.

HOW TO DRINK MATÉ

If you're drinking with a group of people, the general rule is to sip until you've had your fill (don't wipe off the bombilla between people; that's rude), and then pass the maté in a clockwise direction. If you really want to impress a native of Uruguay or Argentina with your finely-tuned Spanish, pronounce bombilla as "bombisha."

DALLAS-AREA MATÉ

In the United States, while maté is still far from mainstream, the tea is gaining popularity and is sold in many health food shops and specialty tea stores. If the bitter flavor of the traditional South American blend is too stout for your palate, choose among flavors from chocolate to orange blossom. The tea is available in the traditional loose-leaf form as well as in bags.

Maté brownies are the newest addition to the wide selection of maté offerings at Tempest Tea (5600 W. Lovers Lane, Suite 111). For the purist, the shop also sells sets of gourds and bombillas for \$24.95 each. Single-serving mugs of maté are about \$2. Contact: 214-351-4832; www.tempesttea.com.

At Roy's Natural Market (130 Preston Royal Village; 214-987-0213) and Ann's Health Food Center and Market (2634 Zang Blvd.; 214-942-9483) you can buy bags of maté or the traditional loose form in several brands. Whole Foods, which has several locations in the Dallas area, also sells maté tea bags in the tea aisle.

FROM THE WEB

Another option for ordering is online, but be sure to shop around, as prices can vary wildly. One Web site, www.yerbamatecafe.com, offers to match any prices offered elsewhere on the Internet. This helpful site also offers tips for the maté novice as well as

a wide variety of flavor selections and products, including a traditional maté gourd and bombilla set for \$8.25.

Online prices for maté generally run from about \$7 to \$9 for a 250 mg bag of loose leaves; a box of 16 to 20 tea bags, \$5 to \$7.