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Food Detective: Taking time for a cup of tea

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Wandering in a bedraggled Cairo neighborhood a few blocks from the Nile, I peered into an Ottoman-era mosque with John Martin, a student of Islamic studies at American University.

"You want look inside?" a voice behind us queried.

It was Hassan Mazloum, who runs an ancient smithy on the dusty, worn backstreet. The humble mosque seemed to be as much his as anyone's. He showed us around like he was welcoming visitors into his family room. Then, he invited us to sit at a small table across from his shop.

Within moments, an old man in a white skullcap rushed out, balancing a silver tray of glass cups filled with reddish-brown tea.

In many Caireen 'hoods, I'd seen workers lounging in the shade, retreating from the Egyptian sun (its deification understandable) and engaged in contemplative consumption of chai.

"A perfect strategy for avoiding work," whispered my American friend.

I asked Mazloum if Egyptians enjoyed frequent tea breaks, explaining that Americans interrupt work at fairly regular intervals to slurp caffeine.

"We drink tea all day, whenever we want," Mazloum said, canting his chin, perhaps defiantly. "We don't work like machines. My son and daughter are always busy. They care only for money. They've no time to live. He added with a curl of his lip: "They drink coffee."

Among some tea drinkers, there seems to be unspoken antipathy toward coffee. Bill Todd of the magnificent Todd & Holland Tea Merchants in Forest Park, schooled me in how tea drinkers differ from imbibers of what he calls "the evil elixir": Tea drinkers "slow down" to savor their sip.

"Technology is sad," Mazloum said, outside his shop where centuries-old manufacturing techniques are practiced daily. "When a man works like a machine, he loses his life."

Sipping tea slower than I believe I'm capable, Mazloum motioned toward the old man in the skullcap zigzagging among clusters of workmen on breaks. "We could all make our own tea, like my son and my daughter make coffee, and let it sit all day in a pot. But I give this man work. He makes tea for us. That is his job."

"There are rich and poor," Mazloum added, as he gingerly took his tea. "We should support the weak."

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