



# Here's cheers to tea's cha-rm

By Jo Winterbottom

YOU don't have to be a tea aficionado to enjoy Camellia Cha's book on the subject.

A roving history of tea's takeover of the world's cafes, kitchens and boardrooms, *Curiosi-tea* is part scientific exploration, part historical narrative, part political thriller and part Epicurean indulgence.

And thanks to Cha's unique take on the world, it's a fascinating ride.

Set out in bite-sized chapters, this is a book you can dip into, cup of tea in hand, at any point.

However, readers should be aware that, like me, you might choose a chapter that takes your fancy and then find yourself burning the midnight oil reading it from cover to cover.

'Camellia Cha' is the alter-ego of Mornington musician, composer, visual artist and author Anne M Norman.

Or, as Norman likes to think of her, Cha is the "Avatar of tea" who came to possess Norman during obsessive research and writing in the wee small hours.

The name is a play on the botanical name of the tea plant – *Camellia senensis* – and cha, the Chinese word for tea.

A compulsive creative, Norman was looking for a project to occupy her fertile mind in between a busy schedule of performances as a musician.

Initially a flautist, Norman took up the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute, when studying ethnomusicology in



Down to a tea: Anne Norman, aka Camellia Cha, enjoys a cuppa.

Picture: Daryl Gordon

Melbourne. She travelled to Japan during her studies and so began an enduring love affair with Japanese culture, which also brought her into the mysterious world of tea.

"My first shakuhachi teacher was a tea nut who used to collect spring water to make his tea," she remembered.

"I realised later that he was trying to teach me about tea all the while."

She began collecting puns on English words ending with 'ty', finishing up with more than 2500 words rhyming with tea.

Such puns became the chapter headings in *Curiosi-tea*, covering every conceivable topic on tea, and some that could only have occurred to the mercurial Camilla Cha's mind.

The technique allows Norman leeway to roam through the history of tea and make associations where a more academic tome might fear to tread.

A chapter on 'Solidari-tea and

Productivi-tea' looks at the invention of the tea break in England during the industrial revolution; 'Hyperactivi-tea' explains the effects of caffeine in tea and how its properties differ from coffee; while 'Immorali-tea' covers the opium wars between England and China. One chapter even tackles nanotechnology as it relates to tea.

Although always a tea drinker, Norman happily admits she knew little of the drink's lesser-known varieties and facts when she launched into writing her book and the project was a process of discovery. It's a fact that shines through the rollicking narrative and makes the reader feel as if they are on a journey with the author.

Norman uses three characters to set out the facts about her subject – Cha, the main voice; Herstorian, who pops up regularly to straighten out the facts and occasionally pull Cha into line; and AMN (Anne M Norman) who chimes

in to explain where facts came from and exchange a few comical asides with Cha. Sound confusing? It's not, but it is different and refreshing – a bit like a cup of tea.

*Curiosi-tea* covers its subject comprehensively and accurately – Norman had experts in various fields check drafts – but she never loses sight of her aim to keep the book fun.

Quirky cartoons and maps, once again the work of Norman, adorn the pages and illustrate the facts.

Traditional Japanese calligraphy by Nozao Shingo also features in this handsome and well-made book, which is self-published by Norman.

She is working on a Japanese translation and an audio version is due in June.

*Curiosi-tea* is available in Frankston at Robinson's Bookshop; in Mornington at Farrell's Bookshop, Page 8 and Bianca's Tea and Coffee; and online at [www.camelliacha.com](http://www.camelliacha.com)