

TEA

a cup of
health
&
history



Tea is the most widely consumed beverage on earth after water. Tea drinking is a ritual steeped in the history, culture, and religions of those who produce and revere it. Tea is also a sensual delight and has been used to ward off the chills, fatigue, and other common ills of everyday life since it was first brewed in China over 4,700 years ago.

Health Benefits

Tea has long been credited with the ability to restore energy, combat depression, aid digestion, and alleviate arthritis. Modern-day studies confirm many of these benefits and have identified the compo-

nents that are likely responsible.

The natural caffeine content of tea increases energy. Tea also contains the amino acid theanine. Studies have found that theanine reduces stress and induces relaxation and that caffeine and theanine work synergistically to improve cognition and mood.

Flavanoids are naturally occurring plant pigments abundant in tea. Catechin is a type of flavanoid found in white and green teas. Studies show that catechins have powerful antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antibiotic effects. When tea leaves are oxidized to make oolong or black teas, catechins are converted into theoflavins. Theoflavins, found only in oxidized teas, act as antioxidants as well and are believed to prevent dementia and reduce cholesterol. Research conducted by the USDA found that green and black teas have similar levels of overall antioxidants.

Studies have found tea effective in preventing cancer, heart disease, and infections. Both green and white tea appear to prevent sun damage and skin aging. Green and black teas appear to reduce the risk of strokes and diabetes. Green tea alone has been associated with weight loss and arthritis prevention, while black tea is associated with stress reduction and improved immunity. Pu-erh tea appears effective in reducing cholesterol.

Types of Tea

All true teas come from the *camellia sinensis* plant. The leaves and sometimes

the buds are plucked, usually by hand, and then processed into one of the major classes of teas. These classes, green, white, oolong, black, and pu-erh can be organized by their level of oxidation from green teas, which are not oxidized, to black teas, which are fully oxidized. Pu-erh teas, which are fermented after processing, have oxidation levels similar to black teas.

Green teas undergo no oxidation.

Heat applied immediately after plucking destroys natural enzymes that would lead to oxidation. The leaves are then rolled and formed according to the tradition of the tea producer. Steeping green tea produces a light green or yellow liquor with a flavor often described as grassy and green.

White tea is made from unopened buds and young leaves harvested from the tip of each tea shoot. Tiny white hairs cover these buds giving white tea its name. Heat is applied to the tea after a short withering period during which slight oxidation occurs. The leaves are then shaped and dried. Steeping white tea produces a pale, champagne-color liquor with a light, sweet flavor.

Oolong tea contains both the buds and leaves of fresh shoots. Traditionally the leaves are shaken in bamboo baskets, bruising the edges of the leaves, leading to partial oxidation. Once the leaves are oxidized to the desired amount, between twenty and eighty percent, they are heated and dried. Steeping oolong tea produces a reddish-brown liquor with a smooth and complex flavor.

Black teas are wilted and rolled to

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release oxidative enzymes and allowed to oxidize completely. The leaves are then shaped and then dried. Steeping black teas produces a deep red or brown liquor with a flavor described as rich, earthy and sometimes malty.

Pu-erh tea is fermented through the use of beneficial microbes after processing. Any of the major types of teas can be fermented to produce pu-erh teas. Steeping pu-erh tea produces a deep reddish liquor. The taste is often described as earthy and mellow with a slightly sweet aftertaste.

Caffeine levels present in teas result almost entirely from the brewing method. The notion that white and green teas have less caffeine than more oxidized varieties is a misconception. Oxidation does not change caffeine content. Having come from the same plant, all teas have roughly the same amount of caffeine, but the less oxidized teas require a lower water temperature and shorter brewing time, leading to less caffeine being released from the leaves into the water. Thus brewed white and green teas tend to have less caffeine than the longer brewed oolong, black, and pu-erh teas.

Buying

Tea connoisseurs agree that loose leaf teas are superior to bagged teas. Wade Dibbert, the owner of Angelina's Tea Shoppe in Winston-Salem, explained that typically loose leaf teas are made from whole or large pieces of tea leaves, while bags are made from small pieces or dust called fannings. Fannings are pieces of the tea leaves blown off with fans during the drying process. These small pieces are then packaged in tea bags. Because the pieces are smaller, bagged tea brews faster and half the amount of leaves produces the same volume of brewed tea, but they produce a bitter and less flavorful tea.

Loose leaf teas are generally sold in bulk by the ounce. Dibbert sells 500 varieties of tea in his shop ranging in price from \$1-\$15 an ounce. Bulk loose leaf teas are available from several shops in the Triad. See TeaGuide at www.teaguide.net for a listing.

Mary Lou Heiss and Robert Heiss write in *The Story of Tea* that 20,000 distinctive teas are produced the world over. This incredible variety arises from the culture and growing condition of the places where teas are grown and processed. Dibbert explains, "Tea is similar to wine in that mineral deposits in the soil and even the weather during the growing season can alter the flavor."

Loose leaf teas should be stored in airtight containers away from light and heat. Metal tins, available for sale in most tea shops, are ideal for storage. Green teas are generally good for a year, black tea for two, and oolong tea somewhere between. Pu-erh teas, which are aged before selling, last for years.

Brewing

Brewing starts with good water. Spring water or filtered tap water are recommended, and according to Heiss and Heiss water should never be boiled more than once.

Proper brewing equipment is important but need not be complicated. Heiss and Heiss point out that, "millions of people the world over make tea under the most primitive of conditions." The most important element is to "allow the leaves to circulate freely in the cup or pot." Dibbert recommends brewing the tea loose in a cup or pot and then pouring the liquid through a strainer or using a basket filter.

Using the proper amount of tea leaves is also important. One teaspoon of tea per 6 ounces of water is the standard recommendation for most teas but may vary depending on the shape and size of the leaves. Consult the tea seller or tea packaging for guidelines.

The water temperature and length of brewing vary by type of tea. In general, white and green tea should be steeped between 160 - 170 degrees fahrenheit, black tea and oolong tea at just below boiling, and pu-erh tea at boiling. Heiss and Heiss suggest bringing the water to a boil and waiting 5 minutes before steeping white or green tea, 2 minutes before brewing oolong tea, 1 minute before brewing black tea, and brewing pu-erh tea immediately.

After pouring the water over the leaves, cover the cup or pot to maintain a constant temperature and prevent evaporation. Heiss and Heiss recommend letting white and oolong teas steep for 90 seconds to 2 minutes, green for 2-3 minutes, and black and pu-erh for 3-5 minutes. All but black tea leaves can be steeped several times.

Once the tea has finished steeping, remove the leaves entirely by straining or removing the basket filter. Then savor the cup of tea that brings the tea gardens of far-off lands and thousands of years of tea history home.

Resources furnished upon request.

Submitted by Jan Wharton of Winston-Salem. For more information, email jwharton@triad.rr.com

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