

(201) 792 3544

50 Harrison Street Suite 316
Hoboken, NJ 07030

Newsletter

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Time for Tea

Holding a warm cup of tea between your palms inspires pauses, reflections and moments of breaking away from the world. From its accidental beginnings 3,000 years ago until today, tea is a symbol worldwide of relaxation, self-nourishment and even the sacred.

The History of Tea

Given its long history and documented health effects, it's not difficult to understand why tea is the second most consumed beverage, next to water, with 1.42 million pounds of tea consumed per day in the United States and an average of three billion cups of tea consumed daily worldwide.

Legend has it, three thousand years ago a Chinese Emperor accidentally "invented" tea when the leaves of a tea plant fell into a pot of boiling water. The first references to people drinking tea are found around 600 BC in China, when it was mostly used as a medicinal beverage. In the sixth century, tea spread first to Japan, where it was processed into tea bricks.

Even though much of the romance and decorum of tea is associated with England, it did not appear there until the 17th century when King Charles II married a Portuguese princess, Catherine of Braganza. The Queen made tea the drink of royalty and soon tea became popular in all levels of society. The East India Company brought tea from China to England, and in the next century, shipped the heavily taxed tea to America, inspiring a well-known Boston Tea Party.

The enormous and slow ships, called East Indiamen, set sail from England in January and arrived in China in September. Americans, wanting their tea in a snappier fashion, created clipper

ships – fast and sleek -- to “clip off” some of the arduous wait for their tea.

Once reaching America, distributors found tin boxes were too expensive, so they began wrapping the tea in gauze “packets”. Customers whipped out their new gauze tea packaging and plunked it, bag and all, into their steaming kettles. Without meaning to do so, just as with the discovery of tea itself, the tea bag was born.

Tea’s history of inspiring new ship designs, trade routes, ceremonies and revolutions has been inspired by our desire to include it as a daily ritual to our lives as well as for its health benefits. Today, you can find tea drinkers who travel the world, and back to China, to reach the “best” and certainly the most expensive tea in the world: \$8,888 for afternoon service at the Ritz Carlton of Hong Kong.

The Health Benefits of Tea

A recent Huffington Post article declared the amazing health benefits to include, the ability to help you look younger, see better, reduce stress, fight diabetes, make your heart stronger, and lose weight. With the wellness movement taking off in America, the health benefits of tea are touted in online and print media daily. But understanding the health benefits of tea, first means understanding the varieties of tea, as tea can be made by pouring heated water over sticks, fresh leaves, dried leaves, herbs, even nuts.

Tea comes from the leaves of a tree called *Camellia sinensis*. The three main types of tea are Black, Oolong and Green. Herbal tea does not come from the leaves of a tea plant, therefore, is not considered to be “real” tea but roots, stems, flowers and parts of plants are used to make a variety of herbal teas. While most believe that herbal teas are the most beneficial, consider the following:

Green tea:

Made with steamed tea leaves, it has a high concentration of EGCG and has been widely studied. Green tea’s antioxidants may interfere with the growth of bladder, breast, lung, stomach, pancreatic, and colorectal cancers; prevent clogging of the arteries, burn fat, counter-act oxidative stress on the brain, reduce

risk of neurological disorders like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, reduce risk of stroke, and improve cholesterol levels.

Black tea:

Made with fermented tea leaves, black tea has the highest caffeine content and forms the basis for flavored teas like chai, along with some instant teas. Studies have shown it may protect lungs from damage caused by exposure to cigarette smoke and may reduce the risk of stroke.

Oolong tea:

In an animal study, those given anti-oxidants from oolong tea were found to have lower bad cholesterol levels. One variety of oolong, Wuyi, is heavily marketed as a weight loss supplement, but science hasn't backed the claims.

White tea:

Uncured and unfermented. According to Oregon State University researchers, white tea has the most potent anticancer properties compared to more processed teas. Presented at the 219th national meeting of the American Chemical Society, the world's largest scientific society, researchers theorized that the lack of processing may play a part in tea's cancer fighting ability, especially its levels of polyphenols.

The Perfect Cup of Tea

Mastery of tea for the Chinese is all about getting the most flavor, color and aroma out of each cup. It's done with specific rules of preheating the pots, rinsing the leaves briefly, and using large portions of tea steeped for shorter amounts of time.

A great cup of tea starts with high quality tea leaves. Make sure your leaves come from a quality tea garden and aren't dust (leftovers after tea has been processed). Loose tea is, for connoisseurs, the best way to taste tea: the quality of the tea leaves, which are often whole, and not broken up as in tea bags, is often higher, and retains more of their original flavor. Heat water to the temperature recommended for your tea using a convenient hot water heater or a stovetop kettle. Once water is heated, steep your tea for the recommended time (which varies by tea) in a teapot. Pour tea into your favorite tea cup. Enjoy!

Best Teas for Children

Holly Torgerson, a community herbalist provides the following short list of some of the best teas for children. Remember, if you are sweetening tea with honey, children under a year old cannot have honey.

Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) is one of the best soothing remedies to have on hand. It's calming to the nervous system, can make an upset tummy feel better, and can even help ease the pain of teething when rubbed on the gums. It's soothing in baths as well. The tea is mild tasting and can be enjoyed alone or sweetened with honey or a bit of apple juice.

Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) is good for the immune system. This tasty herb is high in bioflavonoids and antioxidants and helps build up defenses against colds and flu. It can also make recovery a bit easier.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) is a tasty cooling remedy that soothes upset tummies and can help to gently bring down a fever. The tea brings almost immediate relief to stuffy noses and sore throats.

Lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*) is calming, antiviral and antiseptic. It is particularly useful in alleviating stress and anxiety and can be used to help kids wind down and go to sleep. Lemon balm makes a delicious tea that can be served with lemon and honey.

Slippery elm (*Ulmus rubra*) is a demulcent herb that supports the entire digestive system. It coats mucus membranes so it is soothing for sore throats, dry cough, and reflux. It can soften and add bulk to stools, so it is useful for both diarrhea and constipation. Since the herb is slightly sweet, it is one that children will take readily if the powder is mixed in some breast milk, applesauce or juice. The tea can be very slimy.

In Summary

The health benefits of drinking tea are varied and vast. As a substitute for coffee and soft drinks, tea is the obvious choice.