

Stefanie Peters
1022 words

BE A TEA CONNOISSEUR

Tea may seem like an upper-class European drink, but it has had much to do with America since the country's beginnings. The history of tea in the United States has been a story of limited supply. When the East India Company had a monopoly over tea sales in the colonies, Americans had to drink green tea. After the American Revolution, black tea consumption caught up to green until World War II. The supply chain of green tea was disrupted after Pearl Harbor—Japan was one the country's main tea suppliers. As part of the war effort, Americans switched flavors and sources – black tea from South America became popular and consumption of green tea dropped to only 2-3% of the tea consumed nationally.

Today, any kind of tea is available, not only green and black but also previously unobtainable varieties, even teas from specific producers in certain tea-growing regions, making tea-buying sound like navigating between the thousands of varietals of wine. Choosing which tea is right for you can be intimidating, but with some basic information it can prove to be both enjoyable and affordable. Here's a breakdown of what you need to know to become an instant tea connoisseur.

All true tea comes from the same plant, *Camellia sinensis*. There are four main types of tea: green, black, white and oolong. The difference between the four varieties depends on how the tea leaves are processed. Soon after the leaves are picked, they will begin to both wilt and

oxidize if they are not dried. The transformations the tea leaves undergo affect both the flavor and the health properties of the tea.

“All tea has strong antioxidant properties. Whether you drink white, black or green teas – it doesn’t make a difference,” Al Hamman, Marketing Director for The Original Ceylon Tea Company in Dallas, Texas, says. “If you compare it to most anything else that’s out there it’s a no brainer. Water is the best; coffee has a lot of caffeine. Tea has fractionally the amount of caffeine coffee has. If you’re looking for something as a health supplement that has antioxidants, it’s really tough to find something better than tea.”

“People who haven’t been drinking tea for a long time will turn to black because it’s a more traditional tea,” Hamman says. Black tea leaves are wilted, crushed, and oxidized. Joe Simrany, the President of the Tea Association of the USA, describes oxidation as a process where the producers set the leaves “in piles six inches high and let it oxidize for three or four hours. Complex changes take place in the leaf, including color. They turn from green to copper and many flavors are developed within this process.” Oxidation, also called fermentation, gives black tea the most flavor and the most caffeine of all types of tea.

Simrany describes oolong teas as “a cross between green teas and black teas. Green teas are considered unfermented or unoxidized,” he says. “Black teas are oxidized, and oolongs are in-between.”

Oolongs leaves are wilted, partially oxidized and bruised to create a stronger flavor than green or white tea. Oolong teas have long been unpopular compared to green and black varieties, but they are a perfect choice for tea drinkers who prefer a subtler flavor than black teas.

Green tea leaves have been allowed to wilt but are un-oxidized. Green tea is traditionally seen as the healthiest type, although, as Hamman says, this is a “byproduct of the number of

studies that have been done. There are myriads of studies on green tea and what it can do for your body and the health aspects of it.” Simrany agrees: “A lot of scientists are coming out of Asian countries where green teas are the most consumed beverage. The compounds in green tea are easier to track in the body than black or oolong tea.”

Green teas are loaded with antioxidants and EGCG, a substance found in many health supplements, and are also low in caffeine. Their flavor is noticeably lighter than black teas; sometimes described as “grassy.”

White tea is both un-wilted and un-oxidized, meaning that the leaves are dried immediately after being picked. “The most subtle of all are white teas,” Simrany says. “They’re very very rare and becoming very popular.”

White tea was virtually unknown in the United States until recently; it is produced in much smaller amounts than other types of tea. Now, with such products as Snapple White Tea on the market, consumers are becoming more aware of its existence. White tea, John-Paul Lee, CEO of Tavalon Tea, a company opening a new “haute couture” tea bar in New York City, says, has the most antioxidants, which are good for your health, and the least amount of caffeine.

Once you understand the different kinds of tea, it’s simply a matter of finding a quality tea that you can enjoy. Simrany likes to compare tea to wine, describing how the variations within the four basic kinds of tea are like varietals of wine. “The ultimate flavor of the tea,” he says, “is a product of many different factors – the elevation it’s grown at, the soil conditions, the climatic conditions, when the monsoons come, and the skill of the tea maker – like the skill of the wine maker.

“There are literally thousands of variations of tea within China, not only within those four primary categories, but also nuances between how the leaf is twisted. It’s all in the skill of the individual producers that bring about these changes, and it’s not just in the appearance, it’s also in the flavor.”

With specialty tea stores popping up everywhere and tea being offered in most coffee shops today, finding the right product is easier than ever. No longer is there a monopoly on tea or only one variety available, like there was for the American colonists.

“We got off on the wrong foot in this country with tea, but it’s becoming much more popular than it was before,” Simrany says. “Tea is the next in a long line of products just waiting to be discovered. The beauty of tea is that there’s so much to discover.”

-30-

Sidebar: Herbal Teas

Herbal teas don’t come from the tea plant at all; Lee says “a lot of people have the misconception that herbal teas are better for you. They really aren’t teas.” Actually, herbal teas are combinations of herbs and flowers, called tisanes.

Sidebar: Tea and Wine

Simrany likes to compare wine to tea, but what separates the two is cost. “The most expensive tea in the world on a per serving basis is very affordable for the majority of American consumers,” Simrany says, “and you can’t say the same thing of the most expensive wine in the world.

“Sometimes it’s worth it to pay a little more to get a better quality tea,” Hamman says.

Lee concurs: “it’s a matter of getting the right product first and then preparing it correctly.”