
WHAT'S IN SEASON

A PERFECT CUPPA

BY LAURA MARTIN



Most communities in the United States who boast “eating locally” cannot include tea in that lineup, but, thanks to the Charleston Tea Plantation, South Carolina’s Lowcountry can joyfully make this claim. The Plantation, owned by Bigelow, is located on Wadmalaw Island and is the only commercial tea plantation in the United States, the next closest being 4000 miles away!

Increasingly, Americans from coast to coast are becoming more enamored with tea, but we are far from the obsession experienced by other nations during tea’s long and varied history. Consider, for example, what the eighth-century Chinese poet wrote: “I am in no way interested in immortality, but only in the taste of tea.”

If you are not quite ready to give up a chance of immortality for the taste of tea, perhaps you just haven’t tasted enough tea yet! This is a situation many people are working to change.

Tea, taken with milk or sugar, alone or with friends, cold or hot, brewed or bottled, is the darling of the food and beverage world these days. Although carbonated soft drinks still dominate the U.S. beverage market, change is in the air—or perhaps in the teacup. With consumers more eager to make choices based on health and nutrition, tea is quickly gaining in popularity.

Tea is the most consumed beverage (other than water) in the world and has been appreciated and revered all over the globe for centuries. The first documented records of tea drinking are from China, dating back to 300 C.E., though the legend of the mystical emperor Shen Nong dates the discovery of tea back to almost 3000 B.C.E.

Tea plants are indigenous to many regions of Southeast Asia, but for centuries, or maybe even millennia, China was the only place in the world where tea was cultivated, meaning all the tea in China was really all the tea in the world. All types of true tea—white, green, oolong and black—

Photo by Carole Topalian

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come from the same plant, *Camellia sinensis*. The difference in taste is due to different processing methods.

Today tea is grown in many different countries—36 semi-tropical and tropical places. Who produces the most? Last year it was India, with China as a close second and Kenya coming in third. But who drinks the most? Per capita, Turkey is first with each individual averaging more than 1000 cups per year. The U.K. comes next, then Morocco.

Although the United States is far down the list for drinking the most, the popularity of tea here, both as a beverage and as a meal, is growing rapidly. People go to tea houses and tea rooms in restaurants to sip and nibble, of course, but more important, they come to enjoy the company of friends.

Charleston Place provides the perfect environment for doing this. David Teich, director of operations and sales, food and beverage for Charleston Place says, “Afternoon tea is more about the social experience than the meal. The bite-size food, served in three distinctly different courses, allows for socializing and easy conversation while eating.”

When asked about his favorite tea and food pairing, the answer came quickly: “the Organic Green with Ginkgo Tea paired with Tomato, Cucumber and Vegetable Cream Cheese Sandwich or the Orange Passion Fruit Tea paired with the Mixed Berry Scones.”

Another tea haven in the area is the Charleston Tea Company (not associated with the Charleston Tea Plantation), at 24 Ann Street. In their fourth year of operation, the Tea Company sells 35 different kinds of teas, either brewed by the cup or purchased as loose tea for brewing at home. Sandwiches and small sweets are also available for pairing with tea.

Though most of us this side of the Atlantic regard high tea as a highly sophisticated social occasion, in England, the terms designating high and low tea mean quite the opposite to how we use them in the United States today. Originally high tea was a term used to describe less of a social occasion and more of a family meal. Low tea was actually the more sophisticated of the two. Low tea was served to guests in a formal room. Everyone sat in armchairs or sofas, and tea and fancy tidbits were served on a low table beside them. The food served was bite size for ease of eating. Thus the term *low* tea originated from the height of the low table on which it was served.

High tea was generally served at a (high) kitchen table with a full place setting around 5:30 or 6:00 when workers returned from the fields and children came home from school. High tea, sometimes called *meat tea* included savory meats, soups, puddings and sweets and lots of robust tea.

The explosion of interest in tea has been coupled with an availability of different kinds of tea. Today, tea houses offer old favorites, such as Earl Grey (black tea flavored with bergamot) and English Breakfast (a blend of robust black teas from India and China), as well as a huge

number of green, white and oolong teas, flavored and blended with any number of flowers, herbs and spices. Along with true tea, most houses also offer tisanes, “teas” made from plants other than *Camellia sinensis*. Chamomile, mint and hibiscus are only a few of the many herbs often used to make tasty tisanes. Perhaps the most popular “non tea” is the relatively new (at least to the U.S.) rooibos (pronounced *roy-boss*), made from the stems and leaves of an African red bush plant. Rooibos not only tastes delicious, it also is high in antioxidants and is completely caffeine free.

Along with a diversity in teas offered came a greater selection of foods that are well paired with various teas. For example, the delicate taste of white tea should be enjoyed with foods that will not overpower it. Try tidbits such as cucumber sandwiches, melons or light rice dishes. Green tea, too, is relatively light and requires fresh, clean tastes of items such as grilled vegetables, salads or sushi. Oolong (which bridges the gap between the light green teas and the more full-bodied black teas) can hold its own with grilled chicken, shellfish or heartier fish such as salmon. Black teas are the most robust and are best taken with fare such as meat pastries, cheeses and desserts. Black teas are most traditionally served with the typical English tea food of scones, biscuits, cookies and small cakes.

Whether you take your tea in the comfort of your own home, snug in your favorite bathrobe or at a well appointed tea house with your best friends all dressed in their finery, tea is sure to bring a respite from the frenzy of the day. As you finish the last drop, you just might be moved to agree with the twentieth-century Yukon poet, Robert Service, who exclaimed, “Bless the man that first discovered Tea!”

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BREWING A PERFECT CUP OF TEA

Each tea is unique and deserves individual attention. Brewing time varies according to tea type and personal preference, but the following should help you get the most out of your tea:

- Use a good quality tea, whether it comes loose or in a tea bag.
- Use high quality water. Natural spring water is reputed to be the best but filtered water is a good substitute.
- Warm the pot (or individual cup) with hot water before you pour water over tea leaves.
- Use the right amount of tea leaves. For most teas this equates to a teaspoon per 8 ounces of water.
- Brew for the right amount of time. Green teas generally only brew 1 – 2 minutes, white tea brews 7 – 8 minutes, oolong and black teas brew 5 – 7 minutes.