A beginners guide to TEA

Tea is second only to water as the most consumed drink in the world. In the UK alone, it is estimated that about 120 million cups of tea are drunk every day! But how much do you actually know about the diminutive tea leaf? This guide is your starting point into the fascinating world of tea.

WHAT IS TEA?

All tea comes from the leaves and buds of just one very special plant species - Camellia Sinensis. Even though all tea comes from one plant there are about 1500 varietals of Camellia Sinensis. These range from small and delicate shrubs to large and ancient wild tea trees (up to 1800 years old!).

The tea plant is a sub-tropical plant that grows best in acidic soil in a warm and humid environment. The best tea grows on high mountains, in places where large temperature differences exist between day and night and where there are often cloudy skies.

The type of tea (White, Green, Oolong, Black etc) is decided by how the leaves are harvested and processed.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TEA

This little leaf shaped the modern world. Tea was one of the first commodities to be traded outside China which opened up the ancient trade routes between China and the rest of the world. Tea was the primary reason for the Opium Wars which led to modern day Hong Kong. Tea was also the sparking point for American independence. Nearly every country in the world has been shaped and influenced by tea. Here’s an extremely brief timeline:

2737BC  Tea drinking was discovered by Emperor Shennong.

600  Tea becomes the most popular beverage in China.

760  Lu Yu published his tea book “Tea Classics” – the original encyclopaedia on tea.

804  Japanese monk brought tea seeds from China to Japan to start Japanese tea cultivation.

1600  Dutch ships brought Japanese green powder tea for the first time to Europe.

1662  Portuguese wife of King Charles II, Catharina of Braganza, introduced tea to English court.

1773  Tea from the East India Company landing in Boston was prevented from being unloaded by protestors who thought British taxes on tea were unfair. The protestors dumped £70,000 worth of tea into the sea. This was known as the Boston Tea Party which sparked American independence from Britain.

1800’s  Tea was controlled by the Chinese and could only be bought with silver. English merchants did not want to reduce their silver supplies so started to illegally trade opium to China from the Indian colonies for silver and then use the silver for tea. This led to the Opium Wars. Britain won the wars and took Hong Kong.

1830’s  The East India Company looked for ways to be independent of China and sent in a botanical spy, Robert Fortune to steal cuttings and tea techniques. These secrets were used to start the tea cultivation in India.

1840 - 1860  Anna the Duchess of Bedford introduced afternoon tea which became an English tradition.
The Basic Process

Every tea is different and every supplier has their own unique (and often closely guarded) methods for tea processing. As a general guide the basic process involves the following stages:

- **Picking**
  Selecting and carefully picking the leaves.

- **Wiltl**
  Sun drying or gently heating to remove some moisture.

- **Bruising**
  Breaking the cell membranes of the leaf to start oxidation.

- **Heating**
  Heating the leaves to stop the oxidation process.

- **Shaping**
  Rolling the leaves to shape and break the cells.

- **Drying**
  Removing all moisture so that the leaves stay fresh.

- **Scenting**
  Optional process of adding natural scent using freshly picked flowers and herbs.

Tea bushes first produce buds which will become leaves that grow larger over time. As they grow their chemical content changes and their flavour changes. The tea picker will choose the leaves according to the type of tea which is being produced.

The more expensive teas are hand picked. A skilled picker must select the right leaves, and pick them using a special method of twisting and plucking to prevent any damage. The process is extremely labour intensive, a good picker will collect up to 2kg of tea leaves for every 10 hour shift which produces about 500g of dried tea.

A fundamental factor determining tea type is oxidation. If the tea leaf membrane is broken by rolling or shaking then plant oils are released and natural oxidation will begin. The leaves turn progressively darker because chlorophyll breaks down and tannins are released.

Heating the leaves deactivates the enzymes that cause oxidation. It also adds flavour to the tea. In China, most teas are heated in a dry pan but they can be steamed or baked.

There are really 2 purposes to the shaping stage. The first is to alter the taste by breaking the cell walls and releasing the essence of the tea. The second is to create distinctive and beautiful shapes which unfurl in water.

The drying stage can include an element of roasting to further develop flavour or it can be neutral drying.

The tea is mixed with a fragrant plant or flower in order to absorb its aroma. For a Jasmine tea, the delicate Jasmine flowers are plucked when the tiny petals are tightly closed. The flowers are mixed with dried tea and overnight the petals open releasing their fragrance. In the morning the flowers are carefully removed from the tea and discarded. The highest grade Jasmine teas will have this process repeated many times.
**WHITE TEA**

White tea is the closest you can get to the natural state of the tea leaf. It can only be picked for a short time each year, making it generally more expensive than other teas.

White tea is made from new growth buds and derives its name from the tiny, silver white hairs on the dried tea. The leaves are picked and allowed to dry slowly under the sun or indoors. They undergo slight oxidation.

**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

White teas are elegant and delicate with a pale colour, a gentle fruity and floral fragrance, a mild, sweet flavour and a silky finish. A good white tea is said to be warm in taste but cooling in nature.

**TYPE OF LEAF:** bud and sometimes baby leaves  
**OXIDATION:** 5-10 %  
**PROCESSES:** simply withered and dried slowly

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**GREEN TEA**

Green tea was the first tea produced and today it is the most popular in terms of both production and sales volume.

Young tea leaves are picked, wilted and then heated either with steam or by dry cooking in hot pans in order to kill the natural enzymes in the leaf that cause oxidation. The tea leaves may then be rolled into small pellets to make shapes like gun-powder and pearl tea.

**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

There are many different varieties of Green tea, all with their own flavour profiles. Generally, Green tea is fresh and grassy but can have complex floral, toasted or nutty notes.

| TYPE OF LEAF: | bud and baby leaves  
| OXIDATION: | 0-5 %  
| PROCESSES: | pan heated or steamed

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**YELLOW TEA**

This is the most rare of all tea types. Yellow tea was popular during the Imperial times because yellow was the colour of royalty. The processing technique was thought to be lost forever until it was rediscovered in the 1970’s, since then it has been produced in small quantities.

Yellow tea is processed in exactly the same way as green tea but is lightly heated a second time in a moist environment, which turns the tea leaves yellow. This extra stage removes the grassy notes and adds a sweet, mellow flavour to the drink.

**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

Yellow tea could be described as somewhere between a white and a green in flavour. It is pure and elegant with delicate but complex notes and an amazingly smooth finish. This tea is all about the transformation of water into something even more pure.
**OOLONG TEA**

Oolong is such an interesting tea type because there are an incredible number of varieties all with very distinct and sometimes unusual characteristics.

Oolong is a semi-oxidised tea which means that it is in between green and black. The tea leaves are shaken to release some of the natural oils on the edges of the leaves and then left and allowed to partially oxidize.

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**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

There are many different Oolongs, all with their own flavour. Oolongs can have complex notes of nuts, flowers, butter, chocolate and burnt sugar.

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**BLACK TEA**

Black tea is fully oxidised tea (or above 90% oxidation). The Chinese call it red tea because of the colour of the liquid it produces.

The tea leaves are withered and then rolled to allow all the natural oils to be released and the tea is left to fully oxidise. The tea is fired to dry.

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**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

Black tea is robust, sweet and strong with good tannin development to give a dry, quenching finish. Complex in flavour, black tea can have deep notes of licorice, smokiness and tobacco or be sweet and floral.

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**PU’ERH TEA**

This is tea from the original and ancient varietal of tea tree and can only be grown in Yunnan, the birthplace of tea. Renowned for its health benefits and its unique flavour, this tea can command the highest prices under auction.

Pu’Erh tea is technically a fermented Green tea made from special broad leaf tea leaves that have a unique chemical composition making them suitable for ageing. Artificially aged Pu’Erh is called SHU and is fermented for nearly 2 months in controlled humidity. Naturally aged Pu’Erh is called SHENG.

**TYPE OF LEAF:** usually medium leaves
**OXIDATION:** 10-80%
**PROCESSES:** Shaken before heating

**WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?**

A good Shu Pu’Erh should be complex and earthy and have the smell of autumn leaves without being musty. The finish should be incredibly smooth and clean with a lingering sweetness.

Sheng Pu’Erh is like a very complex green tea, fresh and juicy with undertones of tobacco and astringency. It’s flavour mellows and softens beautifully with age.

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The people of Yunnan enjoy a very fatty diet but have low rates of obesity and cardiovascular problems, the solution was traced back to the amazing slimming effect of this tea.
SCENTED TEA

Any tea which is fragranced with the aroma of another plant is called a scented tea. The process usually involves mixing the tea with a flower or fruit to fragrance the tea. This is very different from artificially scented tea. The most widely produced scented tea in China is Jasmine, another example of scented tea would be Earl Grey.

WHAT’S THE TEA LIKE?

A good scented tea should have a strong, fragrant aroma of the flower but still retain the flavour of a good quality tea. This perfect balance is what connoisseurs look for in any scented tea.

The health benefits of scented tea depend upon which type of tea is used for scenting. The floral essences add extra benefits. For example, the scent of Jasmine is extremely calming and in recent studies was proven to effect the relaxation centres of the brain.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF TEA

Centuries before tea started to become a popular beverage in China, it was used as a medicine. A humble cup of tea is one of our best defenses against illness and ageing. Tea contains a multitude of substances which contribute to good health. The main ones are:

- **ANTIOXIDANTS** - Antioxidants mop up the free radicals to stop cell ageing and damage. There are extremely powerful antioxidants called CATECHINS which are found almost exclusively in TEA.

- **L-THEANINE** - This is an amino acid which produces feelings of well being and relaxation by increasing the production of ‘feel good’ chemicals in the brain.

- **VITAMINS & MINERALS** - Tea contains vitamins B, C, E, A, D and K and compounds which contribute to health.

WHAT’S TEA GOOD FOR?

- **ANTI-CANCER** - Antioxidant properties of tea have been proven to have a powerful anti-cancer effect.

- **IMMUNITY** - Theanine has been shown to boost the disease fighting capacity of T cells by up to 5 times. The high Vitamin C content in tea also helps to prevent and fight infection.

- **CHOLESTEROL** - The catechins in tea block cholesterol absorption and increase the excretion of cholesterol.

- **BLOOD PRESSURE** - Tea decreases the tendency for blood platelets to clot which helps the blood flow more easily. This helps to reduce excessive blood pressure.

- **SLIMMING** - Tea raises the metabolic rate of the body which speeds up fat oxidation and calories burned. Tea also aids digestion and the emulsification of fats. Tea is anti-angiogenic which reduces the body’s ability to store excess fat.

- **BLOOD VESSEL HEALTH** - Research has shown that the antioxidants in tea are extremely effective at improving vascular health and increasing blood flow without raising blood pressure.

- **DIGESTION** - Essential oils and polyphenols aid digestion by increasing the flow of digestive juices and emulsifying fats.

- **DIABETES** - Tea has been shown to reduce blood sugar level peaks after eating. The catechins in tea block free radicals in order to help prevent nerve damage and cataracts in people suffering from diabetes.

- **HEALTHY SKIN** - Free radicals can damage the skin and cause it to prematurely age. By scavenging these free radicals, tea protects the skin and helps to reverse some of the damage to promote healthy and radiant skin.

- **MENTAL AWARENESS** - Theanine in tea actively alters the attention networks of the brain by crossing the blood-brain barrier. The result is a calm yet alert mind.

- **STRESS & ANXIETY** - Tea lowers stress hormone levels. Cortisol levels in regular tea drinkers were found to be 20% lower than non-tea drinkers. Theanine in tea also stimulates ‘feel good’ chemicals in the brain to promote relaxation.
THE ART OF TEA PREPARATION

For centuries in the East, the art of brewing the perfect tea has been practised and revered and has ultimately led to the tea ceremony. A great tea can be ruined by bad preparation so it’s worth paying attention to the fundamental factors:

TEA QUALITY

To truly explore tea drinking the first thing to do is THROW AWAY THE TEA BAGS! There is a huge difference between the powdered sweepings inside a teabag and proper loose leaf tea. Now that you are drinking the real stuff, here are just some of the factors to think about when selecting your tea.

1. Area it was grown - soil, climate, altitude and surrounding plants.
2. How it was grown - quality of plantation and agricultural practice.
3. Year it was harvested - different years produce different qualities of tea.
4. Time of year it was harvested - spring is best for light teas and autumn for oolongs.
5. Method of picking - hand picked is always best.
6. Processing method - steamed or pan fried, shaken or rolled there are so many variations.
7. Storage and ageing - dry aged in air or kept air tight.

QUALITY OF WATER

True tea connoisseurs are fanatics about water, and have been for thousands of years. The first books written about tea had as much content about where to find the best water as that of the teas themselves. Ideally tea should be made from glacial or artesian water but filtered water is a good alternative.

TEMPERATURE OF WATER

For Oolong teas and Pu’Erh, the water should be close to boiling. Black tea, Yellows and Whites need slightly cooler water (around 85-95 degrees). Greens require the coolest water (around 70-80 degrees) to avoid extracting excessive bitterness. Just stop the kettle when you hear a loud rumbling and steam is rising from the kettle spout.

WASHING THE TEA

We advise rinsing the tea leaves in hot water for a few seconds before brewing. This begins to open the leaves which allows for shorter steeping times with less possibility of stewing the tea.

BREWING TIME

A good rule of thumb is to brew all teas for about 2 mins (unless brewing Gong Fu style). Brewing tea for too long will cause the release of excessive tannins which will give a dry finish to the tea and spoil the flavour. If you would like a stronger tea then use more leaves rather than extending the brewing time. Remove the leaves after brewing and keep for the next infusion.

NUMBER OF INFUSIONS

In China people delight in tasting how a tea changes flavour over multiple infusions. Indeed the second infusion is generally considered the best. In China they say that ‘the first infusion is to wash the tea, the second is to taste the tea and the third is to experience the spirit of the tea’. All tea which is brewed Western style can be infused at least a few times and if you are brewing Gong Fu Style then you can brew many more infusions.

AMOUNT OF TEA

The amount varies depending on the tea but generally a teaspoon (that’s where it gets its name after all) is the right amount for 300ml of water for Western style brewing. Gong Fu Brewing is about 3-4 teaspoons per 200ml.

TYPE OF CUP OR POT

Just as it is important to drink wine out of a wine glass or brandy out of a brandy glass, the material and shape of the cups and pots are very important to bring out the best of particular types of tea. Glass and porcelain are neutral and can be used for all tea. Yixing clay is perfect for brewing strong darker teas like oolongs, black and PuErh.

GONG FU BREWING

The tea ceremony (also known as Gong Fu) maximises the scent, flavour and subtleties of the tea leaf. It is simply the ultimate way to enjoy tea. It involves a very specific of processes performed with small pots and cups on a water tray. The main difference in brewing style is that a lot of tea leaf is used and the brewing time is very short.

To browse our extensive range of fine loose leaf tea please visit:

www.chinalifeweb.com

chinalife sells the tea ceremony sets with full instructions

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