
THE BASICS OF TEA

WHAT IS TEA

All tea comes from one flowering evergreen shrub, *Camellia Sinensis* regardless of where it is grown. The variations in tea are caused by differing conditions in the tea-growing countries - where it is grown, when and how it is plucked - and what is done to the leaf after it is plucked. Two plant strains are found - Assam and China.

TYPES OF TEA

There are 3 major classifications of tea - Black (fermented/oxidized), Green (unfermented) and Oolong (semi-fermented). These are achieved by different manufacturing processes, i.e., varying degrees of withering (evaporation of moisture), rolling, oxidation (fermentation) and heat. The tea most commonly known around the world is black tea although green tea has also gained wide acclaim.

WHERE IS IT PRODUCED

Tea is produced commercially in tropical and subtropical regions of the world. India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia are some large tea-producing countries. Other countries also produce tea - Argentina, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Turkey, among others. Typically, hot temperatures and heavy rainfall are key to growing tea.

GRADES OF TEA - BLACK TEA

Grades of tea can often be confusing. Black tea from India and Sri Lanka is usually divided into leaf and broken grades. Leaf grades generate flavor and color more slowly than broken grades. Leaf grades are typically OP, FOP, TGFOP, FTGFOP, variations of Orange Pekoe (Flowery Orange Pekoe, Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe, Fancy Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe). Broken and smaller grades are usually BOP, (Broken Orange Pekoe) Fannings or Dust and are critical to the production of tea bags. Grading refers to the size of the leaf only and is not necessarily a reflection of the quality.

GREEN TEA

Green tea comes mainly from China, Japan and Taiwan and, to a lesser degree, from other countries such as India. The critical difference between green and black tea is that the leaves are not allowed to oxidize since this leads to oolong or black tea. The tea is, instead, steamed or pan-fired, rolled and fired. Green tea is not graded similar to black tea above but more often classified according to age, style of the leaf and manufacture, e.g., Gunpowder, Pan-fired, Mao Feng, Young Hyson etc.

LOOSE LEAF TEA vs. TEA BAGS

Although commercially packed teabags may be more convenient than loose leaf tea, the finest tea should be enjoyed in its loose leaf form. Teabags carrying the ubiquitous "Orange Pekoe" label often imply a grade and quality that is missing. Common mistakes in brewing tea are not using fresh water, using tepid water, using the wrong amount of tea and steeping too long or too little.

HERBAL BLENDS/FLAVORED TEAS

Herbal teas are not teas at all but a mixture of herbs. Because they are used like teas i.e., in tea bags or steeped in water, they are called "teas" but they are not! Flavored teas can be black, green, oolong or herbal.

CAFFEINE

Caffeine content in tea is widely debated. The broad agreement seems to be that a cup of tea has about half the caffeine content as that of a cup of coffee. Black tea is reported to have more caffeine than green while herbals have none. Indisputable evidence on this is difficult to obtain with varying numbers provided by several sources. Testing has revealed that there can be significant variances within teas from the same category, for example, two green teas.

BENEFITS

The health benefits of tea are everywhere in the media today. There is evidence that it prevents cancer and strokes, strengthens the cardio-vascular system, aids digestion, reduces tooth decay, enhances the immune system, purifies blood, assists liver and may reduce bacterial infections and food poisoning.