

Tea Time

Brewing a pot has never been so complicated—or so satisfying

BY DRÉ DEE

It used to be that buying tea meant choosing your favourite brand from among two or three, or just grabbing what was on sale. Now, so many brands, flavours and packaging styles exist, it's all a bit overwhelming. Just like coffee before it, tea-drinking has exploded in Canada: a 2005 ACNielsen survey shows 77 percent of us drink tea, and Statistics Canada reports that in the same year we each sipped about 280 cups, on average. The reported health benefits—less caffeine than coffee, potential cancer-fighting antioxidants—are part of the growth in tea's popularity. But something else is brewing: tea-drinking has become trendy.

While bubble tea, with its bright colours and chewy tapioca "pearls" remains popular among teens especially, grown-up tea trends are driving the market. Louise Roberge, president of the Tea Association of Canada (www.tea.ca) explains that last year for the first time, sales of specialty teas, such as green tea, flavoured black tea, decaf and herbals, outsold traditional varieties. There's a controversy brewing here, however, because not all tea is tea.

True tea is made from the leaves of the *camellia sinensis* tea bush; other varieties, such as chamomile, mint, and Rooibos, are made from a combination of herbs, flowers, bark, spices and fruits, and are more accurately called "tisanes." While there's still a huge market for these, authentic tea is what the connoisseurs reach for, says Stephen Field, an instructor for the Tea Appreciation Certificate Program at George Brown College in Toronto.

Thanks to the touted health benefits, green tea



Brewing basics

Contrary to popular belief, brewing a good cup of tea involves more than throwing a bag in a cup and adding boiling water. Next time you have tea, try to follow these simple steps:

- 1 Start with cold distilled, or spring, water. Avoid tap water.
- 2 Bring water to a rolling boil in a stainless steel kettle. As soon as the water boils, remove from heat. For green or white teas, wait about 30 to 60 seconds before pouring water over the tea leaves (otherwise the leaves will burn, creating a bitter taste).
- 3 Steep tea until you're happy with the flavour. Generally, green tea should steep for about one to three minutes, white and black teas about three to six minutes and herbal teas should steep for up to eight minutes.

continues to be hugely popular. Unlike black tea, which is made from fermented, or oxidized, tea leaves, green tea is not fermented. Instead, it's generally steamed, then dried immediately after harvesting, retaining its fresh taste and lower caffeine quotient.

Field and fellow instructor Bill Kamula cite three cousins of green and black tea as candidates for the next tea craze. First, there's white tea, which is made from the new buds of tea leaves. Premium quality white tea is picked for only a few days in early spring, and is processed similarly to green tea. It is thought to have even more of the healthy antioxidants green tea is known for, though there's a price. Pure high-quality white tea costs two to three times more than black tea staples such as orange pekoe. Connoisseurs may also turn to the even more rare, pungent and aptly named Pu-erh

(poo-AIR), which is used extensively in Chinese herbal medicine. But it's even pricier than white tea. "It's expensive because it's one of the only teas that's aged," explains Field. "It can be aged 30, 60, up to 100 years."

By far, though, both Field and Kamula agree that Oolong, with a flavour somewhere between black and green, is soon destined for greatness. "Oologs are certainly the most fragrant," Kamula says. "Unlike a Pu-erh, which can be a challenge to the nose because of its pungency, Oolong has more mass appeal." Oolong tea is also less costly, easier to purchase and is widely offered in Chinese restaurants.

Kamula has one last word of advice that applies to all varieties: go with loose-leaf tea. "No matter how good a tea bag is, it's not giving you the best expression of what tea can be." ☞