



Simply Tea!

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CHAPTER 2

WHERE DO I START?

OK, you know there are very real benefits to be gained from drinking tea, right? Unless you are what I loosely term a “tea connoisseur”, (think in terms of a wine connoisseur) you may not know where to begin. I am not a tea connoisseur and I know how confusing it can be trying to find your way in the world of tea. Not only do you have to decide what type of tea to drink, “Do I drink green tea, black tea, oolong tea? What on earth is white tea?” but you also have to learn how to brew it properly, what type of utensils you will need and where to buy it.

Let’s start at the beginning then.

What type of tea should you buy?

There are several different types of tea, with each type named according to how much the tea leaves have been oxidized or processed. Black, green, oolong and white tea all come from the same plant --Camellia Sinensis (yes, tea plants are related to the garden Camellia!) Oxidization is a natural process that occurs after the tea is harvested. Immediately after picking the tea leaves begin to wither and the oxidization process begins.



Black tea is the most highly oxidized tea. Most people are familiar with black teas – they are easily spotted on all supermarket shelves and, at least up until recently, one of the most common teas bought and enjoyed in many Western countries. Typically, the type of black tea bought in supermarkets is that in teabags -- Lipton teabags, Earl Grey Teabags, Bushells teabags etc. Usually though, teabags are often filled with “leavings”, not whole leaf tea. What is the difference? Tea leavings are low quality -- often what is left over from the processing of whole leaf tea which may include parts of stems as well as parts of the leaves. Naturally, the flavour of teas made from teabags is rarely as good as that made from loose leaf tea.

You can purchase loose leaf black tea. If you are a black tea enthusiast you will find that loose leaf black tea is far superior than that found in tea bags. Some of the best black teas come from China, India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon teas).

Here are a few facts about loose leaf black tea:

- It is higher in caffeine than either green or oolong tea
- Slightly lower in antioxidants than other types of tea
- The strongest flavoured tea -- it has a rich, full bodied flavour
- Longest shelf life
- May also be called Red tea
- The leaves are fully oxidized

Green Tea is not allowed to oxidize at all. As soon as the leaves are picked they are processed and dried. Sometimes it is pan dried, other times it is oven dried resulting in dehydration of the leaves. Because of the quick drying process, green tea is high in antioxidants that make green tea such a healthy choice. The tea has less of a full bodied and more of a “grassy” or “green” taste.



It is perhaps the most popular tea, after black tea, well known for its health benefits. Traditionally it is mainly grown in China and Japan, although Taiwan now also produce a good selection of high-quality green tea.

Here are a few facts about loose leaf green tea:

- It is lower in caffeine than either black or oolong tea
- Slightly higher in antioxidants than other types of tea
- A grassy or green flavoured tea
- Needs careful storing as it does not keep as long as black tea and it can absorb other flavours.
- The leaves are not oxidized



Oolong tea is my favourite. I think of it as a cross between black and green tea. It does not taste as ‘green’ as green tea nor is it as full bodied as black tea. This is because of the oxidization process it goes through. Oolong tea leaves are not dried right away. Instead they are allowed to wither after being picked for a shorter time than black tea. The amount of oxidization depends on

the type of oolong tea. Those oxidized for shorter times are closer in flavour to green tea, while those allowed longer oxidization times are amber coloured and have a sweet after-taste.

While it may not have quite as many antioxidants as green tea, it still has very high amounts and it is a great alternative for people who may want the health benefits of tea but prefer a smoother, or less “green” taste.

My favourite oolong teas are produced in Taiwan, though China also produces some very good, high quality oolongs. In Taiwan, the most common tea served with meals in restaurants or while visiting friends is usually oolong.

Here are a few facts about loose leaf oolong tea:

- It has slightly more caffeine than green tea but far less than black tea
- High in antioxidants with green tea having slightly more
- Can be oxidized anywhere from 12%-85% with the lightly oxidized teas closer in flavor to green tea
- Needs careful storing as it can also absorb flavour
- Leaves are usually rolled (often by hand!) before being heated to halt the oxidization process
- Some oolongs are flavoured with charcoal smoke

White tea, originating in China, was once reserved for the Emperor and his household. It is the most delicate of teas, made from the buds of the tea plant (Silver Needle White tea) or the first two leaves directly under the bud (White Peony white tea). They come from China and are just starting to become more known outside of the country.



The taste is very delicate, the least strong tasting of all of the loose leaf teas with a subtle after-taste. They are the least processed of all teas with the tea made from the soft leaf buds. They are also often the most expensive of the loose leaf teas.

Here are a few facts about loose leaf white tea:

- It has virtually no caffeine, though it may contain some depending on where it is grown.
- Leaves are not crushed or rolled
- High in antioxidants
- Does not go through the oxidization process
- Needs careful storing as it can also absorb flavour
- The most delicate of all the loose leaf teas in aroma and flavour

Choosing the right tea

It is important to choose the right type of tea to start with, especially if drinking loose leaf teas is new to you. If you are switching to tea because of the health benefits gained from doing so you will probably want to start with a green or oolong tea.

Moderately priced teas are best. In other words, I would not recommend you start off with the most expensive teas as it is something you acquire a taste for and you may appreciate the more costly teas once you are more experienced at tasting the teas. If you want to enjoy your first experience, I would not recommend the

cheapest teas either. Basically, if you are serious about switching to drinking loose leaf teas you want the experience to be pleasant and something you enjoy which is why I recommend something in the mid-range.

Choose your taste preference beforehand. If you are not fond of green or grassy flavours you may want to opt for starting out with oolong tea as the taste is a little more sweet and palatable. For those who have been used to drinking black tea with milk, a great choice is Milk Oolong Tea which has a subtle flavour that reminds some of milk tea. Flavoured oolongs are also a great choice -- Rose Oolong tea, for example, is a popular first choice.

If you would prefer green tea, you may want to opt for some of the blended green teas such as Jasmine Green tea or Jasmine Pearl Green tea, or Strawberry Green tea.

Buy small amounts at first. Once you have established your preferences you can buy larger packs of tea. Some online shops offer free samples, or sample packs (of 10gm). Instead of buying 100 gm of one type of tea (most sell tea in 100 gm or 50 gm packs) purchase 5 or 10 sample packs for the same price. That will give you a variety to try.

Make sure you receive instructions on how to brew the tea as most teas have different instructions when it comes to brewing. Black teas use boiling water, oolong teas should be brewed with water at about 190–205° F, green teas at 160–190° F. Different teas also require different steeping times. Don't worry, this isn't as difficult or overwhelming as it sounds and you should receive instructions along with the tea that specifies how hot the water should be, how long to steep it, and how many times you can reuse the leaves (re-steep the tea.)

Here's a quick steeping guide:

- Black tea: Pour boiling water on the tea leaves; let it steep for about 4 or 5 minutes.
- Oolong tea: Boil the water, let it sit and cool for about 2 minutes before pouring on the tea leaves; let it steep for 2-3 minutes.
- Green tea: Boil the water, let it sit and cool for about 3 minutes before pouring on the tea leaves; let it steep for 2-3 minutes.

An important caution: Give yourself time to get used to the taste of the tea before trying another. Introduce yourself to one or two teas at a time. You will probably find, over time, that you will naturally develop a preference for one or two types of tea; there's no need to decide right away. Your preference may well change once you are familiar with different teas. For example you may prefer one tea in the morning, another during winter, another during summer, a different type before bed or with your dinner.

Storing Loose Leaf Teas

Once you buy your tea(s) you will want to make sure you store them properly. Tea naturally absorbs flavour, aroma and moisture if not stored properly. (Yes, tea can even become mouldy!) Some people make the mistake of storing their tea in a cupboard with other herb teas, spices or food and then wonder why the taste changes.

Tea should not be exposed to either air or light--even though your Rose Oolong may look very pretty in a glass storage container, it will lose flavour and colour if you store it in such a way.

Invest in a couple of air-tight tea caddies or opaque zip-lock bags and store in a dry, dark place away from other food and aromatic spices or herbs. Brushed steel or stainless steel caddies with tight fitting lids work well and are readily available online. Prices vary depending on the size and the type of steel used, as well as whether or not the caddie is plain or decorative.



Do not store tea in the refrigerator as there's too much change in humidity which can result in your tea absorbing moisture.

Tea is quite often sold in vacuum packed foil bags. If you are only storing a small quantity of tea, you can leave the tea in the bag and invest in a bag clip to seal it shut afterwards. Those that work best are the seals that actually slide onto and across the top of the folded bag, as they provide an airtight seal. Ties do not work nearly as well.

Personally, I love to invest in tea caddies as they are not only practical but they often feature great designs that can add a touch of colour and style to any kitchen or dining room. My favourite designs are the Chinese tea caddies. They often feature Chinese artwork though you can also find plain coloured caddies. While you can find them in some stores, they are easy to purchase online for very reasonable prices--and, being lightweight, they are also cheap to post. You can find either round or square caddies. For storage, square caddies work well.

In the next chapter we'll learn how to properly brew loose leaf teas -- it's really all in the making!