

## The Secrets of Tea

In the past, people believed that black and green teas came from different types of tea plants. In reality, all types of tea differ only in the processing methods. There is just one tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*.

The quality of tea depends on proper harvesting and processing. Usually, the top two young leaves along with the bud, called a "tip," are picked. The youngest and highest quality leaf is labelled as Orange Pekoe (OP), the second as Pekoe (P), the third as Pekoe Souchong (PS), the fourth as Souchong (S), and the fifth as Congo (C). The last two are used for lower-quality teas.

When purchasing certain types of black tea, you may come across mysterious abbreviations that describe the tea's quality. For example, **SFTG/S/FOP stands for Special Finest Tippy Golden/Silver Flowery Orange Pekoe.**

Simplified abbreviations can be understood as follows:

**SFTG/S/FOP:** Special and rare tea

**FTGFOP:** Exceptional tea

**TGFOP:** Very high-quality tea

**FOP:** Excellent tea with great flavour and aroma

**OP:** Very good tea

**P:** Average tea

**PS:** Below-average tea

**CTC:** Tea processed using the "Crushing, Tearing, Curling" method

Some abbreviations also include a "B" for "Broken," meaning the tea consists of broken leaves. Fanning (F) refers to small tea particles, while Dust (D) refers to tea powder.

## A Cup of Tea? But Which One...

Tea is classified based on the way the leaves are processed. You can taste black, green, white, oolong, pu-erh, matcha, yellow and sometimes also purple tea. In addition, there are countless varieties that differ in flavour and aroma depending on the region of cultivation, harvest time, processing methods and storage. These factors also influence the caffeine and theine content in each brew.

### Black Tea

Known for its relatively high caffeine and theine content, dark colour, strong flavour and

long shelf life. In Asia, it's often called red tea. Famous varieties include Assam, Darjeeling, Ceylon and Rize.

### **Pu-erh**

This tea, often dark and from Yunnan Province, can also be made from green or white tea. Some dislike it probably due to poor preparation or low quality. Pu-erhs can be stored for long periods of time, which helps to develop their flavours. It contains a similar caffeine level to black tea and is often pressed into cakes, tablets, bowls or balls.

### **Green Tea**

Green tea is typically dried immediately after harvest. Premium teas are still processed by hand today, so the tea retains its green colour. The health benefits of green tea are gaining more attention, with ongoing studies highlighting its positive effects. Popular green teas include Sencha, Gyokuro, Gunpowder and Dragon Well (Longjing).

### **Matcha**

A powdered Japanese tea used in traditional tea ceremonies, prepared by whisking the tea in a bowl. The plants are shaded before harvest to increase the chlorophyll content, giving matcha its bright green colour. It's becoming increasingly popular and is widely used in food products.

### **White Tea**

Made from young buds picked before they unfold, white tea is not oxidized or rolled. The hairs on the leaves give them silvery appearance. The tea has a delicate flavour, with a pale yellow or light brown brew. Popular varieties include White Peony (Pai Mu Tan) and Longevity Eyebrow (Shou Mei).

### **Oolong**

A semi-oxidized tea that bridges the gap between green and black tea. Some oolongs are rolled into small balls, while others remain loose. The third or fourth infusion is often considered the best. Well-known oolongs include Iron Goddess of Mercy (Tie Guan Yin), Water Sprite (Shui Xian) and Big Red Robe (Da Hong Pao).

### **Yellow Tea**

A rare and precious type of tea that dates back to the 17th century, originally given as tribute to the emperor. It is a special type of green tea with a slower drying process, giving the leaves a yellowish colour. Its flavour is softer and sweeter than green tea. If you're curious to taste it, look for tea with the poetic name Yellow Buds from the Misty Mountains (Meng Ding Huang Ya).

### **Purple Tea**

A recent addition, purple tea comes from tea plants with purple-tinged leaves due to

anthocyanin pigments. These nontraditional teas are mainly grown in Kenya and processed similarly to other types of tea.

### **Flavoured Teas**

Tea easily absorbs surrounding aromas, which can be a disadvantage in storage but beneficial for creating flavoured teas. Popular examples include Earl Grey with bergamot, Moroccan mint Touareg, jasmine and chrysanthemum tea. Flavoured teas offer an endless variety of tastes, ranging from fruity to spiced.

## **Processing Different Types of Tea**

### **Take Time for a Good Cup of Tea**

You don't have to be a tea master to enjoy a satisfying cup of tea. By following a few simple guidelines, you can bring out the best flavours in your tea. Start with quality tea leaves and clean water. Let tap water stand or filter it before use. For each type of tea, the ideal water temperature and steeping time are usually specified—following these recommendations can make all the difference.

### **Water Temperature and Steeping Time**

The water temperature and steeping duration significantly impact the tea's flavour. Too hot or too long a steep, and the tea can become overly bitter or astringent, while too cool or brief a steep may prevent the flavours from fully developing.

### **Recommended Steeping Times and Temperatures**

Black Tea, Pu-erh: 3 minutes at 100 °C (212 °F)

Oolong: 2-3 minutes at 65-90 °C (149-194 °F)

White Tea: 2-3 minutes at 75-80 °C (167-176 °F)

Green Tea: 1-2 minutes at 50-70 °C (122-158 °F)

Fruit, Herbal Teas: 8-10 minutes at 100 °C (212 °F)

### **Leaf Structure and Steeping**

The structure of the tea leaves affects how long they should be steeped. The more broken the leaf, the faster it infuses. Pu-erh and oolong teas often benefit from longer steeps, with second or even third infusions offering enhanced flavours.

## **Types of Tea Leaf Processing**

Tea Bag

CTC (Crush-Tear-Curl)

Cake/Pu-erh Disc

Whole Leaf

Granules

Spirals

Pearls

Needles

## **Tea Quantity**

The strength of the tea depends on the quantity of leaves used. More leaves yield a stronger infusion, while fewer leaves will require a longer steep for equivalent strength.

## **Serving Tea**

Tea can be served in various ways, using large or small pots made of glass, porcelain, or special Yixing clay. Another popular choice is the gaiwan—a cup with a lid and saucer. For the best results, preheat your tea ware with hot water, and using a cooling bowl to adjust the water temperature before pouring can help you achieve the ideal brewing temperature. For a complete tea setup, it's also helpful to have accessories like a strainer or filters, a scale, a pu-erh knife, and a tea tray. Beginners may also benefit from using a thermometer.

## **Tea That Isn't "Tea"**

Besides traditional teas, other popular beverages around the world offer refreshing flavours and benefits. Some contain natural caffeine, like coffee, cocoa and cascara (coffee cherry tea). South America's yerba mate and guayusa also provide a caffeine boost.

Many caffeine-free infusions are also widely enjoyed, including rooibos, honeybush and hibiscus—all originating from Africa. In Asia, various herbs and fruits are brewed for their flavours and health properties, like chrysanthemum, bitter melon, bamboo, lotus, bael, yuzu and butterfly pea flower.

## Yerba Mate

*Ilex paraguariensis*

Yerba mate is typically dried over an open flame, then roasted, crushed and left to age in piles or bags for several months. It contains 1–1.8% caffeine and is traditionally served in a gourd (calabash) with a metal straw (bombilla).

The word maté in Quechua originally referred to a gourd, but it is now widely used to describe herbal teas, such as maté de coca. Leaves of the Asian holly *Ilex latifolia*, also known as tarajo, are sold as “needle tea” or Ku Ding Cha. These leaves, which resemble large black coils, are prized for their liver-supporting properties and ability to lower cholesterol.

## Rooibos

*Aspalathus linearis*

*Rooibos* means “red bush,” named so for the reddish colour of both its young, sprouting leaves and their infusion. It is processed similarly to traditional tea, though there is also a green, unfermented version. Rooibos is enjoyed hot or as iced tea.

It is naturally caffeine-free and has a much lower tannin content. Additionally, it contains up to 7% protein, minerals, antioxidants and vitamin C. Due to the compound aspalathin, rooibos has calming effects, helps combat stress and insomnia, and boosts immunity.

Rooibos is also used in cosmetics, weight-loss products, as a natural dye, and in traditional medicine, where it is given to children for relief from colic.

## Honeybush

*Cyclopia genistoides*

Honeybush leaves are stacked and fermented to develop their unique flavor, then sun-dried and sieved. Like rooibos, it is caffeine-free, with fewer tannins, and is enjoyed hot, iced, or in blends, also added to sauces as a natural colorant and flavouring. It is said to increase appetite and promote lactation.

Originally, only wild honeybush was harvested, but today it is also cultivated on plantations.

## Hibiscus

*Hibiscus sabdariffa*

Hibiscus tea is known for its tart flavour, thanks to the high content of organic acids—nearly 30%, including tartaric and malic acids—as well as anthocyanins, flavonoids, pectins,

polysaccharides and vitamin C. It has diuretic, laxative, fever-reducing properties, and can even help break down kidney stones. The fleshy calyces are used to make not only tea but also jellies, jams and refreshing drinks.