



# A beginners guide to

# TEA

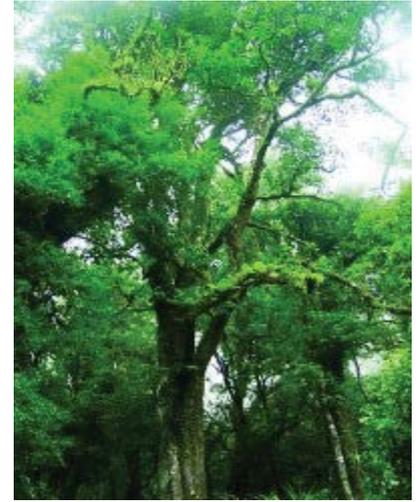
Tea is second only to water as the most consumed drink in the world. In the UK alone, it is estimated that about 120 million cups of tea are drunk every day! But how much do you actually know about the diminutive tea leaf? This guide is your starting point into the fascinating world of tea.

## 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 varieties of *Camellia Sinensis*. These range from small and delicate shrubs to large and ancient wild tea trees (up to 800 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, Red etc) is decided by which variety is used and how the leaves are harvested and processed.



*Ancient tea trees*



*Cultivated tea shrubs*

## 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**

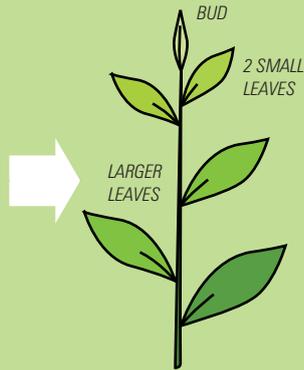
Anna the Duchess of Bedford introduced afternoon tea which became an English tradition.

# 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.



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.

## WILTING

Sun drying or gently heating to remove some moisture.



## BRUISING

Breaking the cell membranes of the leaf to start oxidation.



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

Heating the leaves to stop the oxidation process.



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.

## SHAPING

Rolling the leaves to shape and break the cells.



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

## DRYING

Removing all moisture so that the leaves stay fresh.



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.

## SCENTING

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



# 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 do not undergo any oxidation, they are not rolled or shaken but are simply steam heated or sometimes gently baked in the sun.



TYPE OF LEAF:  bud

OXIDATION: 0%

PROCESSES: simply steamed and left to dry

## 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.

# 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.



TYPE OF LEAF:  bud and baby leaves

OXIDATION: 0-5%

PROCESSES: pan heated or steamed

## 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.

# 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.



TYPE OF LEAF:  bud and baby leaves

OXIDATION: 0-5%

PROCESSES: Normal then moist heating

## WHAT'S THE TEA LIKE?

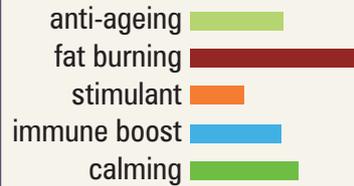
Yellow tea could be described as somewhere between a white and a yellow in flavour. It is pure and elegant with delicate but complex notes and an amazingly smooth finish. This tea is all about the transformation of water into something even more pure.

# 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 red. 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.



TYPE OF LEAF:  medium leaves

OXIDATION: 10-70%

PROCESSES: Shaken before heating

## WHAT'S THE TEA LIKE?

There are many different Oolongs, all with their own flavour. Generally oolongs should have the freshness of a green tea with the sweetness of a red. Oolongs can have complex notes of nuts, flowers, butter, chocolate and burnt sugar.

# RED TEA

Red tea is commonly called black tea in Europe. 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. This can take between 2 weeks to a month. The tea is fired to dry.



TYPE OF LEAF:  small baby to medium leaves

OXIDATION: 100%

PROCESSES: Crushed before heating

## WHAT'S THE TEA LIKE?

Red tea is robust, sweet and strong with good tannin development to give a dry, quenching finish. Complex in flavour, red tea can have notes of licorice, smokiness, pine and tobacco.

# 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 48 days in controlled humidity. Naturally aged Pu'Erh is called SHEN. Pu'Erh is classified and priced by how old it is.



TYPE OF LEAF:  big leaf tea trees

OXIDATION: 0-70%

PROCESSES: Naturally or artificially fermented

## 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.

Shen 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.

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. Although any type of tea (white, oolong, red etc) can be scented, it is usually the green and red varieties which are used. 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.

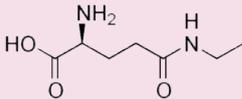
The health benefits of scented tea depend upon which type of tea is used for scenting. The floral essences add extra benefits. For example, the scent of Jasmine is extremely calming and in recent studies was proven to effect the relaxation centres of the brain.

# 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.



*There are 17 tea provinces in China. Tea provinces can be compared with wine growing areas. Different areas are renowned for producing the best of a particular type of tea.*

## 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. Don't use mineral water or distilled water.

## TEMPERATURE OF WATER

For Red teas and Pu'Erh, the water should be close to boiling. Oolongs vary depending on how dark they are but between 90 degrees and boiling. Greens, Yellows and Whites need slightly cooler water (around 80-85 degrees) in order to prevent the delicate leaves from scalding and releasing bitter flavours into the tea.

## WASHING THE TEA

Always rinse the tea leaves in hot water for a few seconds before brewing. This cleans away any impurities and prepares the leaves for the proper brew.

## BREWING TIME

A good rule of thumb is to brew all teas for about 2 mins (unless performing a tea ceremony). 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'. Whites, Yellows and Greens can be infused up to 3 times and Oolongs, Reds and Pu'Erh teas up to 7 times.

## 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 350ml of water.

## 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. A general rule is that glass, metal and porcelain is especially good for White and Green teas and that clay is best for Oolong, Red and Pu'Ehr teas. The shape should be wide to allow maximum room for the tea leaves to brew.



### GONG FU BREWING

*chinalife sells the tea ceremony sets with full instructions*

**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.**

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