

# Time for Tea

Everyone loves a good cuppa, especially the British. Yet in a culture where tea still thrives, the Chinese have their own ways of brewing up...

orget traditional English stewed brews. Think China and fragrance, contemplation, reflection and even digestion. Singapore can introduce you to a whole new and healthier world. Although there are hundreds of varieties of Chinese tea, they can clearly be divided into six categories. The classifications are determined by the method of processing the tea. The six types are green tea, black tea, oolong tea, brick tea, white tea and scented tea:

## 1. Green Tea

Green Tea is the variety which keeps the original colour of the tea leaves without fermentation during processing. It is baked immediately after picking. The tea can be divided into many kinds, depending on the way that it is processed. The most famous among the various green teas is Longjing (Dragon Well) Tea from around the West Lake in Hangzhou. This is celebrated for the high percentage of polyphenols which give it its anti-oxidant properties which are proven to help fight cancers as well as to reduce blood pressure.

## 2. Black Tea

The vast majority of all teas drunk are black teas, also known as "red tea" (hong cha) in China. It is different from green tea as it is fermented before baking. The most famous black teas in China are "Qi Hong" (which originated in Anhui), "Dian Hong" (which originated in Yunnan) and "Ying Hong" (which originated in

Guangdong). The fermentation means that the tea is oxidized so the anti-oxidant properties are not retained.

# 3. Wulong or Oolong Tea

This combines the freshness of green tea and the fragrance of black tea, being made from partial fermentation. It is also popular for its medical benefits, including assisting the body building process and in dieting. Fujian, Guangdong and Taiwan are the major producers of this kind of tea. Oolong tea grows on cliffs and the most famous area is Dongding, the Frozen Peak in central Taiwan. Harvesting this type of tea is very difficult, which increases the cost. The emphasis is shifting on to high quality and the greener (and healthier) the leaf the better.

# 4. Compressed Tea or Brick Tea

As the name implies, this tea is compressed and hardened into a certain shape. This method was devised when the west started trading with China and needed an easier form to transport this valuable commodity. Tea drinkers in Hong Kong swear by this type of tea which is the only tea where age is considered beneficial. The longer the ageing process, the more expensive the tea. Most of the compressed tea is in the form of bricks and is therefore generally called "brick tea" although on occasions it can also be in the form of cakes and bowls. It is produced mainly in Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.

### 5. White Tea

This is the healthiest tea with even more beneficial properties than the celebrated green tea. It is the smallest leaf at the top of the bush and is only plucked in the Spring. Estee Lauder have recently launched a very successful skin care range using white tea which is known for its healthy astringent effects.

# 6. Scented Tea

Popular in Northern China, this tea, as the name suggests, has essence added to either black or green teas. This is often confused with jasmine tea. Some flowers like jasmine, rose and osmanthus (national flower of China) can be added to tea in their natural state. The high quality flowers will be added to white, green or oolong teas.

Now to the tasting. Forget muscle-aching Victorian teapots, the Chinese style is diminutive. The doll-sized pot and cups are deliberately designed to slow the drinker down and encourage one to relax. Here, the smaller the teapot the better the tea. The tiny amounts are not supposed to quench a raging thirst but rather to aid the appreciation as with a fine wine. One should inhale the fresh aromas (perhaps mown grass or melon seeds) and enjoy the fineness of the porcelain cup.

A Confucian tea wizard by the name Yu Lu back in the Tang Dynasty immortalised tea appreciation. Tea had been growing for several centuries but this scholar introduced his passion for the drink to the Empire. He also passed on his teaching to Japanese and Korean monks who visited the Imperial Court. The Japanese and Korean rituals are still as elaborate as the practices in China back in the Tang Dynasty but the modern Chinese ceremony, though respectful of formal manners, is more relaxed in tone.

Appreciation is the key. Yu Lu's "Book of Tea", dating back to 760AD, is still the tea bible. The methods he sets out are very complicated as different procedures match different types of tea leaves. All this sounds bewildering, especially as transparent kettles are recommended so the size of the bubbles can be regulated from "eyes of prawns" for green tea, "eyes of crabs" for jasmine or oolong and "eyes of fish" for black tea. Each cup from one brewing should taste exactly the same.

This can be an hypnotic experience as the little cups get refilled constantly and the poetic descriptive language flows over one. If you enjoy ceremonies and rituals then this tea tasting is for you. It is a good excuse to add to your collection of teapots as each teapot should be kept for the exclusive use of single tea varieties so your oolong tea should not be made in your black tea teapot. The small, red clay pots are much sought after. The Taiwanese take tea very seriously and insist on two sets of cups - one for sniffing (the smell is equally important) and the second for tasting.

# How to Make the Perfect Cup of Tea

 Pour hot water into the teapot to clean and warm it. This helps enhance the colour, aroma and taste of the tea. Pour out the water from the teapot and

rinse the teacups.

- 2. Place the tea leaves in the cup. Curly leaves should fill two thirds of the pot, rolled leaves half the cup and green tea (like lung ching) a third.
- 3. Add hot water and drain immediately. This cleans and "opens" the tea leaves.
- 4. Add hot water and leave for 30 seconds to a minute. This is not a time for sleeping! Temperatures vary; 100 degrees celsius for black tea, 90 100 degrees celsius for oolong tea and unfermented green and white is best brewed with water between 70 80 degrees celsius. (If you don't have a thermometer to hand, you can always use the "eyes" approach recommended by Yu Lu).
- 5. Transfer into tall, sniffing cups in which the tea's colour and fragrance can be appreciated. Pour the tea into narrow cups, not pouring one cup at a time but by moving the teapot around in one continual motion over the cups so they fill together.
- 6. Transfer into small tea cups and drink it hot, savouring the fragrant after-taste. Never drink tea that has been standing for more than one hour because the tannin in the leaves makes the tea bitter. It is also considered unhealthy. Each pot of tea serves three to four rounds and up to five or six, depending on the tea and the server. The goal is for each round to taste the same as the first. Creating consistent flavour is where the mastery of the server is seen.

Enjoying Chinese tea is about creating a convivial atmosphere and stimulating conversation. So why not chill out in a very formal manner. Did you know that the oil from tea seeds is very tasty in cooking - perhaps the next food craze? Watch this space.

For fascinating and informative tea tasting you shouldn't miss out on the BA Tour to the Yixing Xuan Tea House. It's owner, Vincent Low, is both charming and knowledgeable. A former banker, he took an MBA at London University and became an avid coffee drinker until he realized he needed a life change so headed off to study tea at Yu Lu in Taipei. He certainly hasn't looked back since!

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