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Wednesday, 14 December 2011

OT: The Art of Tea

This is my tea shelf. You can only see about half of what I have; the jars are ranked three rows deep. The cardboard and paper packages contain my pu-erh bings; the rest are various looseleaf teas in airtight jars.

By **Ctein**

Once again, we wander far afield from photography. If my off-topic columns are not your cup of...(oh, I can't say it), skip this column and tune in again next week.

My off-topic topic is tea. Expect several columns on this, because I'm a real tea geek. No, I'm not an expert, just a geek. I do not have a seriously refined palate and I don't know most of the descriptive vocabulary. I just really, really like my tea, and I insist upon good tea.

Tea's my major extravagance (other than living in the San Francisco Bay Area). I live on the stuff. Don't like coffee (except iced, when it's hot out). I can't abide the taste of alcohol, I don't smoke, and I've not used any drugs except theobromine. I am an effete, intellectual, elitist teetotaler, and I raise my pinky in your direction.

Lipton's, or one of its brethren, packaged in little tissue paper bags, thrown in a cup, boiling water poured over it, and steep until it's dead? That's the tea equivalent the coffee that's been sitting in the pot at your local gas station since ungodly-A.M. in the morning. It's no wonder you have to load it with mega-amounts of lemon or milk and sugar to make it palatable.

Good tea, properly brewed, is another matter. For a start, "properly brewed" generally means *no* boiling water (unless it's a pu-erh). Pouring boiling water on tea is a lot like making coffee by tossing the grounds in a saucepan of boiling water and cooking it for a while.

Depending on the tea, the proper brewing temperature may be anywhere between 140 and 190°F (60–90°C). Not that there's one right way to make tea. In my various books, I've seen brewing instructions for the same delicate green tea that went from 140° for 90 seconds up to 165° for 3–5 min. Still, a far cry from boiling water.

Speaking of brewing, here's a handy trick if you're caffeine-sensitive. My housemate, Paula, is very much so, as are several friends. They testify that this works. Take those unbrewed tea leaves and pour hot water on them for 30-45 seconds. Pour off that brew and toss it. Ninety percent of the caffeine goes away in that first infusion.

(Important: the results may vary considerably with the tea. While I have found this to work reliably, if caffeine is severely contraindicated for you for medical reasons, do not rely on this!)

My tea preferences lean towards the Japanese and Chinese teas, mostly greens, wulongs, and pu-erhs. Most of it costs real money. Tea prices have skyrocketed this century. Ten years ago I had an absolute upper limit of $100 a pound for tea. These days I often spend several times that, although I've discovered some wonderful and excellent teas in the $10–$50/lb. range.

Even at double digits per ounce, tea is still a remarkably cheap beverage. I describe it as an extravagance, but I'd be surprised if I spend over a dollar a day on tea and I drink about a liter a day. I need only a gram or two of high-quality tea in an individual infuser; 20 portions from an ounce is normal. I get anywhere from three to eight infusions from one portion. Compare that to the price of Starbucks, or even your local gas station coffee.

This just has to be the world's greatest tea infuser. The owners of Aroma gave me one after making a large purchase at their shop; it changed my life.

How do I brew tea? I am like a total fan of the individual PIAO 1

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infuser. It makes brewing a fresh cuppa easy, no fuss and very little muss, and it's fun to play with. Measure in a teaspoon or so of leaf. Pour in water of the appropriate temperature. Let it steep for the appropriate time. Push the little button on the top and a ball valve at the bottom opens and filtered tea flows into the container. The leaf remains in the top part of the infuser.

Where do you get good tea? There are some good mail-order companies, especially ones that specialize in certain types of teas. For general offerings of all varieties and nationalities, I think Uptons is by far the best. Their catalogs are wonderful and informative. That's where I learned the decaffeination trick. You'll also learn what all the terms of art mean (Lipton's famous "flowery orange pekoe" is not some fancy varietal, it merely denotes a rather low grade of tea quality).

Unfortunately, while they're really quality teas, their tasters just don't have the same palette as I do. Consequently, I don't buy a lot from them. The very best thing about Upton is that they have small sampler packs (good for 2–3 pots) for just a few dollars apiece, so for not very much money I can try a whole lot of different teas. I regularly get samples from Upton to check out and every so often I hit on a winner, like their gyokuro kenjyo.

Most of my buying is from local fine tea shops that I visit, using the word "local" rather loosely. Here are my personal favorites:

San Francisco—Aroma—Haymen Da Luz and Ying Wu

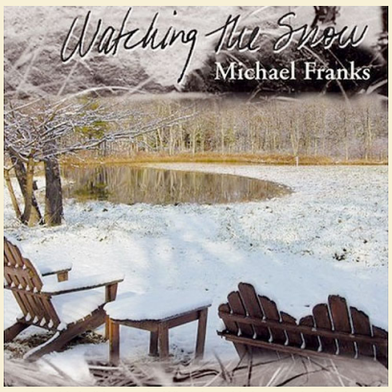
San Francisco—Imperial Tea Court—Roy Fong

St. Paul—TeaSource—Bill Waddington

They all do mail-order, but the nice thing about shopping in person is that you can smell teas, often order a pot of something you want to try out, and discuss your tastes and preferences with the clerks and proprietors. Mail order, you're kind of working blind, until the proprietor gets to know your tastes. Look for one in your own city and you'll discover that a good tea shop is like a good bookstore; the proprietor will be knowledgeable, helpful, and enthusiastic about finding teas that you will especially like.

When I revisit this topic, I'll clue you in on those mysterious pu-erhs I mentioned. They are among my favorites. They were illegal in the U.S. 20 years ago and most people still don't know about them. They're simultaneously the biggest and most affordable bargains in the tea world along with being the easiest way to blow your entire family fortune. How's that for a teaser?

• • •



You *must* buy this holiday music. What does this have to do with the subject of the column? Well, Franks's first major album was "The Art Of Tea."

And now a quick free-associational, seasonal segue.

"The Art of Tea," from which I lifted this column's title, was jazzy singer-songwriter Michael Franks' second album. His "Watching the Snow" is my favorite.

Best. Holiday. Album. Ever.

Not even close to your usual psuedo-carolly, excessively-treacly fare. It plays well year-round. Check it out.

Ctein

Featured Comment by **Emily Cartier:** "Sad, we can't share a pot. I much prefer black teas. I'm not terribly fussy about which exact tea garden grew it. If it's black, chances are there will be interesting flavors, and I'll be happy to drink it. Maybe we could share some herbal tisane instead? I am pretty flexible in my tastes there as well, tho' I have an abiding fondness for chamomile."

Featured Comment by **KeithB:** "I would have thought that you would like 'Tea, Earl Grey. Hot.'" [*The favored drink of Captain Picard of the Starship Enterprise in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." —Ed.*]

Featured Comment by **Benjamin R. George:** "I have to take exception to this generalization that 'properly brewed' tea generally means no boiling water. Green, white, and oolong teas are often ruined by boiling water, but many non-pu-erh black teas are great with it. Since you don't drink a lot of black tea, this is of little interest for you, but your readers should know that your advice is not fully general."

Featured Comment by **Roger Bradbury:** "I have to have two cups of tea every morning to raise my I.Q. above single figures."

Featured Comment by **Robert Roaldi:** "Another good Holiday album is 'The Bells of Dublin,' by the Chieftains, on which they host many guest artists."

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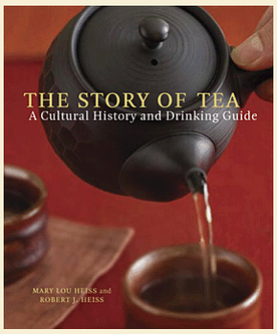
Featured Comment by **Gavin McLelland:** "Mmm..I prefer the darker teas—I have always loved Lapsang Souchong—the smokey flavour goes so well with dates. Quite a treat."

Featured Comment by **Richard Man:** "Ctein, as you may remember, I drink a lot of tea myself. I'm glad to see a refreshing cup of, um, article this morning :-). As for the vast fortune wasted on Pu Erh, that's indeed quite a story. I won't spoiler it. Capitalism at its 'finest.' There are lots of stories about tea of course, but this is a fun one: all the tea, whether it's green or black, are from the same species of the plant. Green is unroasted while black tea is roasted and sometimes fermented (pu-erh). One of my favorite is Jasmine gunpowder. Strong and bold flavor. I confess that there is one tea that I could not like—the Lapsang Souchong—too much like drinking burnt BBQ wood, which is pretty much what it is :-)."

Featured Comment by **Arne Croell:** "Throwing away the first short brew was actually the standard procedure during several tastings in Chinese tea shops (Shanghai and Tunxi) that I had last year. The explanation at that time was not the reduction of caffeine but that the first infusion has a rough taste and the best flavor comes out actually in the third steeping (both for green teas and Oolongs). We could taste test side by side the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th steeping of several teas and the change of the flavors was certainly there. Personally, after trying out many teas in the last 39 years (I became a heavy tea drinker at 15), I've settled on Darjeeling first flush teas from certain plantations as my favorites."



Featured Comment by **Willem:** "This book really was my cup of tea: *The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide* by Heiss & Heiss."

Posted on Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 12:29 PM in Ctein, Off-topic posts | Permalink

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Comments

Lemon or cream, Mr. Ctein?

Posted by: Jim | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 12:36 PM

Happy Holidays Mike and Ctein! Ctein, you've convinced me on the tea! Gotta love the infuser and I'm hoping to get one soon.

Posted by: Laurence | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:07 PM

One of my favorite recurring photo gigs is for the tea shop next door. While normally I'm chained to the studio, James' tea site allows me to wander the nearby parks and take photos of things I wouldn't normally (e.g. flowers, trees, bamboo). Quite relaxing. I also have James to thank for indulging me in my Japanese green tea whims. Though Matcha can get quite spendy.

If you like check out his shop here.

Posted by: Chad Thompson | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:18 PM

What?! No masala chai?

Posted by: Rob Atkins | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:25 PM

As a tea drinker I think you'll enjoy a video by Chap Hop artist Professor Elemental called Cup of Brown Joy.

Posted by: Chad Thompson | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:32 PM

I was never much of a tea drinker until getting married to my wife, who was born in Hong Kong and grew up in NY's Manhattan China Town. Now I love it.

We drink primarily the traditional green teas. My favorite, by far, is Jasmine Pearl tea, which can be quite pricey, but it's worth the cost. It's floral aroma and palette cleansing flavor is perfect for winter evenings.

Posted by: Chuck Kimmerle | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:38 PM

Okay, My curiosity is piqued. How do you pronoun "pu-erh" and why was it illegal until 20 years ago?

Posted by: Jim Bullard | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:38 PM

Ctein: Awesome beard, drinks Pu Erh, total nerd. What more could we ask for?

Posted by: the other James | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 01:47 PM

My tea cupboard looks a lot like yours, although the tea is stored in metal boxes or in their original paper bags rather than jars. I buy most of my tea at a local store. The girls at the cash register know my tastes (mainly greens and whites from China) and tell me when they get a new flavour I might like.

Yes, why was pu-erh illegal? Your country has a long history of prohibition.

Posted by: ggl | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 02:14 PM

With Ctein neatly jumping from one shared geekery to another, I'll share some of my own tea-brewing wisdom. To improve your tea brewing, bear in mind these three attributes: time, temperature, and amount of leaf (ratio to water). Within bounds, increasing or decreasing any of these attributes will correspondingly increase or decrease the strength of the tea. Different teas have different "sweet spots" in this space; experimentation will teach you a lot. Darkroom hacks among you may recall exercises in changing exposures and contrast filters to understand printing controls for a single negative. You can use exercises in the same spirit to master your brewing.

A case study: Many people assume that black tea requires sugar and/or milk to be drinkable. Indeed, that's the stereotype from English tea service. Using our framework above, here's a mind-expanding experiment. Start with a high quality black tea, such as the delicious Chinese Gold Yunnan tea. The aroma of this tea when dry has lovely apricot and citrus notes, but none of this comes out in the usual black-tea "5 minutes, hot" brewing. Put only a light dusting of leaves in your pot, perhaps a fifth to a tenth of a "normal" serving. If you think for a moment there's enough tea, then it's probably too much. Now brew it with full-boiling water for ten minutes.

The result is astounding; a light, fruity amber-gold liqueur. The apricot notes in the dry tea are present in full-force in the cup. Likewise, the citrus notes typical of a good black tea are present, even strengthened. Sweetener or creamer is redundant.

Happy steeping!

Posted by: Johnwhitley | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 03:10 PM

Ctein,

You have struck a chord with the tea discussion. Just finishing breakfast with a pot made from leaves brought by a friend from Nepal. So fresh! Straight off the plantation.

You might or might not be aware of this essay written by George Orwell in 1946:

http://wikilivres.info/wiki/A_Nice_Cup_of_Tea

Happy sipping,

Posted by: Walter Glover | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 03:30 PM

Last time I was in Paris I stopped by Mariage Freres (they have a website). A tea fancier heaven. Even Japan Airline supposedly gets their tea from them.

I finally bought some russian breakfast and also some russian afternood tea. Seems the old russian monarchy knew a thing or two about tea: they invented the samovar to boil tea.

Posted by: Andre Moreau | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 03:38 PM

Thank you Ctein. My son has developed a taste for tea other than the usual supermarket stuff that his mother and I drink. On your recommendation, a Piaoi tea pot is on now its way to me from Amazon UK as one of his Christmas presents.

Posted by: Leslie Ashe | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 03:54 PM

I buy Darjeeling first and second flush flowery tippy orange pekoe in 500 grams quantities, and mix them, ending up with 1kilo of superb black tea. Three full teaspoons and a liter of boiling water, let it brew for exactly four minutes. No sugar, no milk. Use one of those large teafilters.
It keeps amazing me how often friends or relations who have had such a cuppa at my humble place, switch to the same method - and stop using teabags (here in Holland, where the coffee served in pubs is often excellent, tea is most of the time a disgrace: one big bag in one cup of tepid water. Is the standard in many private households as well. Small wonder coffee is often preferred).
Ctein, just in case it isn't clear by now: lovely off-topic topic. Thanks!

Posted by: Hans Muus | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 04:16 PM

Oh, I thought you rinsed the first time because the pickers may not have washed hands. I tend not to do that anyway, and I will want to retain caffeine not waste it. Didn't like tea much, but kept on being given best leaves as gifts on frequent visits to China, so have come round. Last time had to wait until hosts had left airport to dump all the fancy gold and laquer and cloth covered boxes so mountains of tea gifts would fit in our luggage.

Posted by: The Lazy Aussie | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 04:32 PM

Another tea drinker here. Interesting OT column. Good reading.

Posted by: Marty | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 05:06 PM

I am with Gavin. On a cold evening a cup of Lapsang Souchong with a small drizzle of local honey is comforting.

Posted by: Steve Weeks | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 05:55 PM

That comment of mine should have ended "...is not fully general." I apologize for my inadequate proofreading of my comment, and am grateful to our editor for correcting the even more confusing wording of the original that I submitted.

Posted by: Benjamin R. George | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 06:04 PM

I love quality tea as well (luckily I live walking distance from one the best tea houses in all of Los Angeles, http://www.chadotea.com). Being in SoCal, I tend to drink ice tea most of the time. I cold brew my favorite Yunnan's, Darjeeling's and Nilgiri's in a Hario 1-liter cold brewer, http://www.harioglass.com/tea/coldbrew.html

I get 2 or 3 infusions per load of tea, and it's as simple: add tea, add water, put in fridge, wait 3-6 hours and pour into glass. It produces the best cold tea ever (no ice to water it down). The local hipster/fancy coffee shop, Intellgantsia, sells tea using this method for $4-5 a glass depending on the tea. Works well with Black and Oolong teas, doesn't over brew the tea to bitterness and lessens the caffeine.

I've converted soda drinkers to tea drinkers serving them cold brewed tea. Caution: you can only cold brew real tea, Camellia sinensis. It will not work with herbal infusions and can make you sick if you try.

Posted by: Michael Askew | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 06:42 PM

> Compare that to the price of Starbucks, or even your local gas station coffee.

To make a fair comparison of I make my own coffee almost everywhere I go, freshly ground, Peets or Intelligentsia, and I once calculated that it costs me about a dime per cup. Maybe it's up to a quarter now.

What Starbucks charges on top of that is rent and salary and free wifi.

Coffee addict that I am, I doubt I spend more than a dollar a day on it.

Posted by: HD | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 06:48 PM

Agree about Michael Franks. I've got his "Blue Pacific" album with the 1st song being "the art of love". Guess he switched to tea for the 2nd.
As to drinks, I prefer strong coffee made in a French press at around 190f.

Posted by: Doug Howk | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 06:53 PM

I'm not a tea drinker myself, but I was utterly fascinated by this documentary called "All in This Tea", which is available via Netflix Download...

Posted by: Steve E Miller | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 07:04 PM

Pu'er (普洱) comes from the name of an area of China's Yunnan, and is pronounced something like "pooh-R" in Mandarin. I really like Pu'er tea and didn't know it was banned in the US. I hope that you serve the tea in clay pots and cups rather than in porcelain, glass or (heaven forbid) plastic, the taste is much better that way.

Ctein, if you haven't been, you really should come to Taiwan to complete your tea geekery.

Posted by: Poagao | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 07:58 PM

I drink a lot of Japanese & Chinese teas. I buy Sencha direct from a Kyoto plantation. Search for hibiki-an (I don't know how to post a direct link).
Chinese teas I buy from an ebay seller called Dragon Tea House, based in China. I mostly buy Tie Guan Yin oolong and also bought a particular clay teapot for the Oolong that was much cheaper than the prices in Sydney.

Posted by: Michael W | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 08:16 PM

OMG, that Piao 1 is exactly what I'm looking for! I've been developing a taste for pu-erh teas. As you know, you don't just brew a big pot and sit down with it. Infusions must be carefully controlled, which can be a pain in the butt when you're not sipping right next to your kettle. (The traditional Chinese method, I believe is to use really tiny iron teapots. Pour in a few ounces of boiling water and pour off the whole thing when it's ready. Want another cup? Just pour in more water on the same leaves, etc.)

Not to jump the gun or anything, but pu-erh is an acquired taste. Not unlike good Greek yogurts (which tend to smell like sweaty gym socks but taste great), pu-erh smells a bit like a wet dog. Or as I like to say, a wet yak. When it's over extracted it can be bitter and very astringent.

But once you figure out the brewing it's really amazing! I gotta get one of those Piao 1 infusers!

Posted by: Ed Hawco | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 08:27 PM

If you'll allow a plug, I should mention that I was introduced to pu-erh tea by my friend Jeff, who's been living in China for almost a dozen years, working as a writer, photographer (see? I'm on topic!) adventurer, and now a tea exporter.

His current offering is bada, which is a type of pu-erh, which he sources himself as a result of the relationships he's build trekking the ancient tea horse road (he was the first westerner to trek it; and he wrote a book about it).

His import company is here: http://www.jalamteas.com/

Here's Jeff: http://www.jefffuchs.com/

OK, enough product placement. Now it's time for some tea!

Posted by: Ed Hawco | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 08:36 PM

Dear Emily,

Don't get me wrong! I like other kinds of tea.

Paula is especially partial to Darjeelings, and I frequently buy them for her. I even like to drink them on occasion. They're just not what I tend to buy for myself.

~~~~~~

Dear Keith,

Give me a starship and I'll put up with the Earl Gray.

~~~~~~

Dear Benjamin,

I thought someone would call me on that. My handful of tea books aren't entirely in agreement on this matter, but most of them include brewing temperatures for a few teas that are so close to that of boiling water as to not make much difference. But, given that I was writing a Tea For Dummies column (as I am only one step above a dummy, myself) and it is easy to ruin a cup by overcooking the brew, I felt it better that if people were going to err, they do so by brewing cooler rather than hotter.

~~~~~~

Dear Chad,

Until today I had never even heard of “Chap Hop.”

My life is been immeasurably enriched.

~~~~~~

Dear ggl,

Unless you drink your tea fairly quickly, or it is a pu erh, you should not keep it in the paper bags. If they are the metal-coated plastic airtight bags, that's another matter. Most tea, left exposed to the air, will go stale fairly quickly (a matter of a few months). Tea in relatively airtight containers, glass or metal, will last for years to decades.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
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Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 10:32 PM

Dear Ed,

The variety of scents and flavors among the pu'er teas is remarkable. Some of them are extremely potent, as you note. Others are extremely delicate and floral. They are frequently noted for robustness, but that's not a universal trait. The range is pretty amazing, even in my limited tasting. I wouldn't describe them as an acquired taste at all, much more depends upon the particular tea. Much the same where there are some people who like cream cheeses and some who like stinky-Limburgery cheeses.

~~~~~~

Dear folks,

I don't know the REAL story behind the prohibition on pu'ers. The superficial story is that the US Tea Board, created by the Tea Importation Act of 1897, refused to certify them and it only became legal to import them with the Act's demise in 1996. While this was supposedly due to the idiosyncrasies of the chief tea taster, I am inclined to doubt that story on historical grounds. I am also reasonably certain the TIA never was primarily about food purity issues. Recall that for several hundred years, in the second half of the second Millennium, the tea and spice companies of the East and West influenced world politics the way the oil companies do today. Starting with the East India Company and not ending with the Opium Wars.

I suspect there is an exceedingly interesting backstory if one knows enough about East-West politics from the late 19th to the late 20th century. I do not.

But the short story is that up until 1996, the Tea Board wouldn't certify it for importation.

~~~~~~

Dear Aussie and others,

There are lots of reasons people have for tossing the first pour. I will discuss some of them next time. This is a specific methodology–– hot water, 45 seconds –– for eliminating most of the caffeine.

pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 10:51 PM

Gavin McLelland and Steve Weeks are my new favorite people. Richard Man who? :-)

Lapsang (or, as my wife calls it, "campfire tea") does seem to be the one tea about which everyone has a strong opinion - love or hate, no in between, though the latter seems noticeably more common. To me, it's pure love; nothing is more soothing than a nice strong cup, lightly sweetened to soften it a little. This from someone who drinks at least five cups of tea per day, no two of which are the same.

Although my Sri Lankan in-laws still can't understand why they never see condensed milk and sugar in my tea corner, since the drink is just colored water without those...

Posted by: Q | Wednesday, 14 December 2011 at 10:58 PM

I'll be back next week.

Posted by: Tom Swoboda | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 12:06 AM

IN RE: Lipton
I've had a low opinion of Lipton tea for most of my adult like. I did find, during travels in the Middle-East, that their Gold Brand was quite tasty.
I'm of the opinion that when Lipton finishes off a run of tea (chi) for the international market they carefully clean the factory floor and bag up the remains in small pouches and send it to the USA for the great unwashed masses.

Posted by: Bob Dompe | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 12:30 AM

I share your recommendation for the Upton Tea Company (www.uptontea.com.) I have purchased tea from them for over 20 years and have been very, very satisfied with the product and the service. I mostly drink black teas and prefer a Keemun. I like their Mao Feng Superior. Quite inexpensive and very smooth.

The catalog is a gas to read as well.

Ross

Posted by: Ross Hunter | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 12:51 AM

---

my recommendation for tea lovers is to travel to :

1) hangzhou and the close by longjing village (zhejiang province, china - about 130 miles from shanghai). longjing is the origin of dragon well (= long jing) tea, a gently roasted and pressed green tea, the most popular kind of green tea in china.

2) yunnan province, origin of pu er tea.
nothing like the taste of freshly prepared pu er cha, and i should also mention the wonderful high mountain light to eventual photographers.

cheers,
sebastian

Posted by: sebastel | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 01:04 AM

I'm with you on pu-erh... though my wife dislikes the exact earthiness that I like so much!

I'm a bit puzzled by Michael Man's comments. Green teas are just dried. "Black" teas are "fermented" but that only means that the cell walls are broken and the intracellular enzymes and air are allowed to alter the chemistry of the tea for one to a couple of hours, under ventilation. Oolongs are somewhat in the middle. Pu-erhs are allowed to rot, basically (tongue in cheek, in the same way as cheese is "rotten" milk). I wouldn't call it fermentation though because that would involve yeasts. It's more a soil, bacteria, mould, and humidity induced aging.

I second the opinion though that pouring away the first brew has less to do with caffeine. I was told it's to get rid of the dust that had settled on the tea. In the same was as Asians wash rice to get rid of the talc that used to be mixed in it to keep it dry, and the occasional rice dust.

It's funny how traditions in brewing differ.

My Chinese students often brew whole green leaves (and herb teas too) and leave them in the thermos altogether, until the tea is drunk. Refilling on the same leaves is common.

The "proper" "Chinese" way of brewing as I was taught in tea houses would be to use a tiny "purple-clay" (zi sha, or yi xing) teapot, throw the first 30 sec. brew and then brew and drink tiny batches of really just thumb sized tea cups, up to five brewings on the same leaves, letting infuse just 45-90 seconds at a time.

The proper "English Tea" way would be to mostly use black teas to begin with, then infuse 2-5 min and never recycle the leaves.

The proper Japanese way would be a variant of the Chinese way but depends on the tea.

All this just to infuse the idea that there are many "proper" ways of brewing tea.

Ctein, I'd highly recommend trying Ten Ren (www.tenren.com) for Chinese style teas, including pu-erh. For Western style teas you might want to try Mariage Freres... (www.mariagefreres.com).

Posted by: mbka | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 01:32 AM

How can this be off topic?

I now know why so much of what you have to say makes sense. When you are next in W. Australia, let me know and we will drink some Xiaguan 1997 iron cake and drink a toast to Okakuro Kakuzo.

Posted by: D | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 01:35 AM

Agree with Ctein about the taste of alcohol - ugggh. But when it comes packaged as wine, that's another story.

Posted by: Richard | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 02:12 AM

I currently live in Yunnan, so if there's anything you want me to bring back for you... hong cha, puer shou/shu cha (don't ask me for shengcha), though not much lu-cha in Yunnan.

Also, quick stupid pun: in mandarin "Piao I" is pronounced "Piao ee", and the word for a glass is "bei", so it's the "piao ee bei" say the last bit to yourself a few times... I am easily amused.

Posted by: Josh Wand | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 02:36 AM

Tea - The best drink ever!

In England, the supermarket chain Tesco has started selling "Captain Scott's Arctic Expedition Strong Tea" - Great stuff!

Posted by: Steve Smith | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 02:38 AM

... obviously, that should have been Antarctic!!

Posted by: Steve Smith | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 02:39 AM

A topic very near my heart. Just to add a photographic note, tea country tends to be wonderfully photogenic -- rolling hills and terraces, the lovely shades of green on the plants themselves, and the tea workers, always a colorful lot.

Both Darjeeling and the southern regions of Yunnan where pu'er is produced make great destinations for a few days of shooting and sipping. But much easier to get to, and just as pleasant, are the Cameron Highlands, north of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. BOH Tea, imho the best in SE Asia, has a beautiful tasting room there suspended over the terraces. It's a delightful place to spend an afternoon.

Posted by: JK | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 03:35 AM

Pu'er is fermented, which may have to do with its prohibition- it will age gracefully for many years. The story goes that pu-er was discovered by a princess who was sent on a camel train to meet her prince. While on the long journey, the tea fermented. Being desperate for tea, she ordered it to be brewed anyway and pe-ur was discovered.

If you are in Hong Kong, I can recommend (as a consumer only) Lock Cha Tea Shop in Hong Kong park as a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

Posted by: Michael Bearman | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 03:40 AM

For tea in the UK, try Jing tea (http://jingtea.com/)

Posted by: Federico Calboli | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 05:47 AM

I like your off-topic posts.

Thanks for also putting in SI values (° C, millimeters, milliliters) for the "rest" of the world. I wish you'd do it even more consequently, though.

Posted by: Friedrich | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 06:01 AM

Well worth a try, even though your preference is not for black tea, is the Ceylon Lumbini Estate black tea.

It's bright and very malty, but not as soft as an Assam. Think of it as a sauvignon blanc to an Assam's chenin blanc.

Tea Source has it, but I'm sure your local shop does, too.

Posted by: Clint | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 06:38 AM

Oh. Tea. Never drank coffee, until my wife, a Japanese woman, got me into the habit at 29 or 30. I became more and more of a coffee snob as I had more money to waste on such things. Whereas back in the 90s Starbucks was new and fresh and real coffee to me, now I think of it as overheated water having the flavor of burned charcoal. Since moving back to Japan over a dozen years ago, my coffee-snobbism increased with the exploding popularity of small specialty coffee shops.

My interest in tea has not increased at anywhere near the same pace. My wife makes green or oolong tea several times a week and occasionally invests in more exotic, expensive blends of those. I have found that I often prefer the cheapest blends, with what appears to be little puffs of popcorn in it. That and wheat or buckwheat tea. Obviously, I have no taste.

Have to admit, I have never tried matcha. Perhaps it can be prepared differently, but the matcha used in the tediously boring (one of my old Japanese teacher's words) tea ceremony is said to be bitter and nearly undrinkable.

But somehow, Ctein has gotten me a bit interested in trying a few more teas. I need something else to spend money on.

(By the way, most restaurants and hotels serve Lipton tea bags, so that's hardly something limited to the US. Higher-priced restaurants naturally offer a choice of better teas.)

Posted by: David H. | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 06:45 AM

Any thoughts about how water affects tea brewing? Both flavor, and the nasty foamy scum that ends up stuck to the sides of the cup at work but not at home? From what I know of the water chemistry, the home water is basically from the river, and should be 'soft' (low mineral content), whereas the work water is probably from artesian wells and likely to be 'hard' (high mineral content). Anything to be done about it? (I'm not sure it has much effect on flavor, so it may not be important.)

While I can drink them, I've never become a big fan of green teas. Even oolong is mostly not quite right, except perhaps with Chinese food. Jasmine tea tastes like soap (yes, even the better grades). I keep being given teas that take me a long time to consume, so I end up not in control of my experimentation. I think I like Keemun a lot (it's one of the main things blended into "English Breakfast"), but I need to investigate more. Lapsang is quite nice with dessert (though the idea of adding *honey* as one poster suggested is quite appalling). Darjeeling is okay, but not quite the thing mostly for me.

"Therapeutic tea" for when I have a cold is basic black tea with a LOT of honey and lemon.

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 09:50 AM

Ah, but what about a nice cup of 'builders tea?' the drink of labourers and craftsmen throughout the British Isles? This is none of your fancy boutique tea but a staunch bolster against the bitter weather that's usually served from an urn manufactured sometime in the 1930s, with milk and sugar and so strong that your spoon stands up in it? It certainly puts hairs on your chest...

Posted by: Shotslot | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 10:06 AM

Maybe you can shed some light on a recurring family conflict:

DOES THE WATER HAVE TO BE FRESHLY BOILED?

Some insist that a prolonged or repeated boil removes oxygen necessary for the brewing process, while others refuse to believe that the water can remember if it has been boiled before or not.

This, along with the conflict over the utility of the second obligatory stir, has never been resolved.

Posted by: G | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 10:28 AM

This whole debate reminds me of this comic:
http://xkcd.com/915/
Not that I think there's anything with being a connoisseur, mind.

(I'm quite partial to a nice cuppa, just don't have the time or the money to pick up tea as a hobby.)

Posted by: juze | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 10:39 AM

Have you tried matcha? *Good* matcha? Only the good stuff is worth it. Not cheap, but making a (small) cup for yourself will cost about as much as an espresso at any decent coffee house. Try:

http://www.breakawaymatcha.com/

Matcha tea on an Earl Gray budget, that's my dilemma.

Posted by: Rob Reiter | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 11:17 AM

Excellent stuff. Enjoyed reading this as much as just imagining what they taste like. Having a chinese heritage, I'm a huge tea fan too. My dad always gifts me one or two chunks off his latest tea brick acquisition whenever I see him.

I've got to say that where I differ is on the drinking side: I'm the total opposite to you around the teapot. I just put the tea into the cup I'm drinking and keep refilling it with hot water, until it's out. And I never wash my cup. Those tea stains are like scout badges, scratches on a camera if you will (bare brass on a Leica?)...

Pak

Posted by: Pak-Ming Wan | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 12:29 PM

Just as long as you don't do what the English did originally when they brought Tea back, which was to boil it and eat it as a vegetable.

I like Oolongs and greens brewed in a gaiwan when I'm paying attention. When I'm just being lazy, I'll do it the lazy Chinese way and put tea leaves and hot water in a cup and just wait until the tea leaves sink to the bottom and occasionally spit out a tea leaf or two. This works particularly well for me because my cups are jam jars, and I can cover them and take them to school.

And my source of mail order tea is Rishi. They have some excellent teas, and being out of Milwaukee, I get my deliveries rather quickly.

Posted by: James Liu | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 12:53 PM

Dear Ctein,

That's a very interesting article, but you left out the main ingredient -- the water!

I'm fortunate to get my lovely tea water from a glacial fed river and understand how important good water treatment is (even here in Alaska).

What water-source are you using and how are you treating it for chloride/fluoride/BPA (as well as the regular crud)?

Water (and its treatment) is a fascinating topic, it'll have you chasing your tail all day long. (:-)

Cheers,
Chris

Posted by: Chris Gibbs | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 02:10 PM

I've gotten hooked on tea in the past few months, as the doctor told me to stop drinking so much caffeine. (Blood pressure.) My usual source is Lupicia, a Japanese chain that has branches in the Bay Area and LA. Among other things, I've gotten into the Lapsang Souchong lately, I describe it as "drinking a cigar".

A couple things I've figured out - those Zojirushi or similar water boilers with adjustable temperature are amazing. Boiling or hot water, on demand, whenever you want. Another good thing for lazy drinkers like me are the fillable, disposable teabags that Japanese stores sell. You can just dump a spoon of whatever you want in them, and brew like a commercial teabag. They can be found online, but the best place to get them is Daiso, if you're lucky enough to live near one. (There are a whole bunch in the SF-San Jose area.)

Posted by: Maxim Stensel | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 03:13 PM

Lipton tea, marketed to the world as 'English Tea' and yet almost unknown here in the UK. Perhaps on account of it being nearly undrinkable.....

Posted by: Peter Stacey | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 05:37 PM

Dear Tom,

I only go off topic once a month or so, so next week's column isn't going to be about tea. Sorry!

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Dear mbka,

Fermentation does not require yeast. Other microorganisms can be involved. In any case, it's a term of art within the tea field at the very least, so it's a correct use of the term. Much as we photographers use the word “film” in a fashion that might be very different from the way biologists use it.

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Dear D,

“Off topic,” in TOP, does not mean irrelevant or unimportant, only having little or nothing to do with photography.

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Dear Friedrich,

I would prefer to do EVERYTHING in SI units. Always. As far as I'm concerned it wouldn't kill Americans to learn something that almost the entire rest of the world already knows. I've never had an editor who would let me get away with it. If you want to see more of this, beat on Mike's door. It's beyond my control.

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Dear David,

The stuff with the puffed rice in it is gen mai cha. You find it a lot in restaurants, it is a staple beverage. It's one of my regular drinking teas. For me it kind of feels like comfort food in a cup. Good gen mai cha is not necessarily expensive. For a while, my local Ranch 99 market had one that cost about $8 a kilo and was nicer than stuff I'd had that cost 10 times as much. There's also some really wretched cheap stuff out there.

If it's something you're particularly fond of, makes sense to check out the shelves of your local Asian market and buy packages of anything they have. Worst, you'll be out a handful of dollars. Best, you'll find out that one of them is a real winner.

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Dear DDB, G, Chris, et al.

I am so not going to go there. The whole business of water is for me an impenetrable mass of science, pseudoscience, fact, fantasy, tradition, aesthetics, legitimate taste, placebo effect, and the quality of the water and tea to begin with. I cannot make any sense out of it. I don't even try.

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Dear Rob,

Oh, that matcha sounds luscious! Too rich for my blood, though. sigh.

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Dear Maxim,

The first pour of tea doesn't have much less caffeine than coffee or cola! If you're decaffeinating it as I describe in the article, or you're dumping the first regular brew, fine. If you're not, That first cup might as well be coffee as tea.
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pax \ Ctein
[Please excuse any word-salad. MacSpeech in training!]
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-- Ctein's Online Gallery http://ctein.com
-- Digital Restorations http://photo-repair.com
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Posted by: ctein | Thursday, 15 December 2011 at 09:56 PM

Ah, using an HPLC (High Pressure Liquid Chromatograph) and a genuine Englishman (my professor) in the late 80th we did a scientific study of tea (we had to work in a HP HPLC so a sidestep from the usual more biomedical research was in order since no patient material should be wasted on a not properly functioning HPLC). The enemy of tea tast is tannine and related substanses giving tea a bitter unpalatable taste.

It takes time for tannine to leak out of the structure of the cells in the dried tea leaves. Tannine started appearing in about 4 minutes into the tea cooking proces. What we finally found out was a simple and easy to use recepy for (scientificly proven perfect tea).

Use a 2 liter Erlenmeyer as teapot....(PS mark the Erlenmeyer as such). Don't go anywhere near open fire with it, use a microwave to "boil" the water. The nice thing about a microwave is that no convection is needed to evenly heat the water so the water is heated evenly.....wait till the first blob of gas appears.....that is not water vapour but (mostly O2 and some CO2 expediating itself out of the water). Stop the heating proces.....the water now has a temperature of 83 degrees centigrade. Take 2 teabags worth of tea (4 to 8 grams).....soak this in the tea for about 3 to 4 minutes (a bit depending on the brand we used Douwe Egberts English Blend the most popular tea in Holland). Then use British sertified tastebuds and an HPLC to check for any remaining tannine. The perfect tea.....

Posted by: Ed | Friday, 16 December 2011 at 02:04 AM

Lipton tea, marketed to the world as 'English Tea' and yet almost unknown here in the UK. Perhaps on account of it being nearly undrinkable.....

Reminds me of the line in Mary Poppins about the Boston Tea Party: "... they threw the tea into the water rendering unsuitable to drink... even for Americans!".

Posted by: Steve Smith | Friday, 16 December 2011 at 02:07 AM

Ah, but what about a nice cup of 'builders tea?

I have a friend who owns a gallery. About a year ago she opened up a tea parlour in a corner of the gallery and a mug of builders' tea is on the menu!

I spent a day with her at a local tea importers just before she openerd, learning about tea and tasting samples to decide what to stock. It was a very interesting day.

Back to the subject of builders' tea, another friend told me about the tea making facilities in a concrete products factory he used to work in. It was a tin bath with a gas burner underneath, into which was addeed, water, sugar, teabags and milk in copious quantities which was all boiled up and left simmering all day long, being topped up when necessary.

Posted by: Steve Smith | Friday, 16 December 2011 at 02:15 AM

@Ctein Most of the *paper* bags have three layers includig one made from aluminium foil. It's glazed paper ~200 g/cm outside, alu-foil and another layer of thin paper inside. Pretty airtight I guess; the tea keeps well enough in them.

@Peter Stacey I call Lipton "tea broomed off the deck of the ship's deck" mainly because the leaf is crushed beyond recognition and the tea tastes worse than cheap Turkish tea. Actually Turkish black tea from the Black Sea regions bordering Georgia is quite allright if it ain't some silly flavoured variety.

@Pak You're using your cup as you would use a Zisha Yixing clay teapot.

Posted by: ggl | Friday, 16 December 2011 at 03:00 AM

Ah, tea. I'm very dominantly inclined toward Anxi Oolongs and the Taiwanese versions thereof—preferably the less oxidized versions. Usually Tieguanyin or Alishan. I can find good ones around here in the SF Peninsula for $10-12 an ounce; this is $160-200 a pound, but I feel that stating the per-pound price is misleading, because the tea lasts me for a while.

I have good experiences ordering from TenRen, but overall I very much prefer to go to my local teashop (DQ Tea House in San Mateo) and actually smelling the teas before I buy them—I will pick the greener oolong that smells the best.

As for green tea I hardly ever drink it, but my favorite is Biluochun; and for some reason, I've never managed to see Longjing (Dragonwell) tea is so revered.

As for water temperature, my experience tells me that the conventional water temperature rules are often wrong for many teas, especially when the tea is high quality. I've brewed some really good samples of green tea with water just under the boiling point and gotten excellent results; the thing to watch out for is (a) reduce the infusion time, (b) don't cover the pot while it's infusing (to let some of the heat escape), and (c) keep in mind that the flavor profile changes you get a fuller bodied, mouth drying, astringent liquor (but not bitter! it's not supposed to be very bitter!). You also get fewer brews out of it.

As for teaware, I use Korean infuser mugs, small Yixing teapots and Japanese kyusu pots. The main pieces of advice I give people are: (a) for green and oolong tea, avoid teapot designs that require an infuser (it constricts the tea); (b) since high-quality tea leaves allow multiple infusions, the most useful teapots are much smaller than what you initially expect; I routinely use 4-6oz teapots.

Johnwhitley's remarks above on the fundamentals (temperature, time, leaf-to-water ratio) are, well, fundamental, and they bear remembering. I'd add that, at least to my taste, one of the important tricks is to figure out how hot you can brew a particular selection without spoiling the liquor, instead of relying on the usual recommendations (175F for green, 195F for oolong, 208F for black).

Posted by: sacundim | Thursday, 22 December 2011 at 04:42 PM

"Good gen mai cha is not necessarily expensive. For a while, my local Ranch 99 market had one that cost about $8 a kilo and was nicer than stuff I'd had that cost 10 times as much. There's also some really wretched cheap stuff out there."

Yeah, I've had similar experiences. This is one of the reasons why I'm a bit wary of buying tea that I can't at least smell beforehand.

I once bought a great Alishan from a local shop for $10/oz. Went back to get some more a couple of months later, and it wasn't nearly as good as the first time around—but their Tieguanyin was really good that day.

But back before I drank $160/lb and up teas, I found that the Maeda-En brand of Japanese green tea is consistently good quality for a low price, and it's about $6 for 150mg for the "gold" grade (which is noticeably better than their lower grade, for hardly any more money). Ranch 99 certainly carries Maeda-en; I don't recall if they have the "gold" or the slightly more affordable regular one. Japanese grocery stores seem to invariably have the gold one.

Posted by: sacundim | Thursday, 22 December 2011 at 05:03 PM

The comments to this entry are closed.