

Time For Tea!

*Better to be deprived of food for three days
than of tea for one*

Ancient Chinese Saying



Obviously as a Chinese, I like to sing praise about tea. Known as one of the great treasures in China, tea is second only to water as a world beverage. Not limited just to Chinese, more and more people around the world are interested in learning and trying on this fascinating beverage, for the health benefit, as well as the captivating taste of tea. You may think I am biased because China is the most populated nation, whatever drink Chinese people consume certainly ends up to the top rank of the list. I believe that is a very reasonable opinion. So, the purpose of this letter is not to convince you to give up coffee or soda; rather, to provide the insight of Chinese tea drinking. Hopefully, at the end of the reading, you are willing to try on tea!

Chinese people believe that Shen Nong 神农, the legendary emperor, accidentally discovered the tea. Shen Nong lived around 2700 BC; his name means the “Divine Farmer” because he was the first to teach Chinese about husbandry and giving up the nomadic life style. His name often appears on the Chinese mythology books. Shen Nong was also the father of Chinese Herbal Medicine; legends say he personally tried on many different herbs, to test whether they worked as claimed. One day, as usual, he was getting ready to make the concoction of a herbal brew, the water was boiling in a cauldron when some leaves from the nearby tea bushes were blown into the hot water. With his curious and ever inquisitive nature, he did not discard the water and start over, instead, he drank the “stained” water, and liked the taste. Later on, he discovered that tea worked as an antidote to some of the poisonous herbs he tried on himself. That was how Chinese started to drink tea.

So, tea was linked with the wellbeing from the very beginning. Chinese people know its ability to banish fatigue, stimulate mental alertness, and raise energy level. However, like other ancient practice such as the Chinese Herbal Medicine, our ancestors didn’t have the so-called “scientific evidence” to back up their practice though they knew tea worked. Until recent, thanks to the growing interest and numerous researches conducted by scientists, both in China and abroad, we have begun to understand tea, and the ingredients in the tea that contribute to our health.

Camellia sinensis is the scientific term for the evergreen tree or bush that grows in the sub-tropical to tropical climates. Its tender leaves are used to make tea, normally just the bud and one more new leaf are handpicked. The leaves then go through fermentation (or oxidization) for certain length, and are dried quickly to preserve the flavor. Near the West Lake where Longjing tea (literally means Dragon Well) grows, there is a saying—the leaves are treasures at the first three days, and worthy as grass if waiting for three more. Because of the narrow window for plucking, tea has to be picked frequently to

assure the freshness and quality. So, if someone brings you a small bag of fresh home-made tea, consider it a great tribute!



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Different from coffee, tea is both stimulative and relaxing. Caffeine, the stimulant, and GABA, the relaxing agent, and many other minerals and amino acids in the tea work together. If you just want the relaxing effect of the tea, such as consuming before bed time, it is a good idea to drain and throw away the first steep of tea (or make iced tea next morning), and only drink the tea from later steeps since caffeine in tea is water-soluble, 99% of caffeine leaks into the first wash.

Many believe that drinking tea helps with the weight loss, and tea is often incorporated into the detoxification

formula. This “new” scientific discovery is no news to Chinese people. Even as a child, I knew that tea could counteract fat in food, therefore, aid digestion. My grandma never threw away the flat tea leaves after brewing, she used the leaves to clean and wipe off the fat residue on the cooking pot. I was told that this practice existed even before soap was invented. Most of us have the memory of certain moments when our eyes were bigger than our stomach. In my family, a pot of heavy, super-concentrated tea, was routinely served after a feast, such as the Chinese New Year Gathering. The “potion” worked like a magic to ease the pain of the overstuffed stomach. For the same reason, Cantonese eat Dim Sum with Oolong tea on the side. So next time, after an buffet or a cruise dinner, remember to sip slowly a small cup of hot tea, even though you feel no room for anything anymore. I guarantee you will feel better soon.

In China alone, there are more than 500 different brands of tea, this letter will focus on the following three*: green tea, oolong (or blue) tea and red (or black in the West) tea. Although tea is all from the bush *Camellia sinensis*, their flavors can be a mile apart. The strength of a tea is determined by the length of fermentation treated upon the leaves after plucking. The longer the fermentation, the darker the color, the stronger the taste. The green tea, with minimal fermentation of a day or two, have relatively light and subtle flavor; and the red tea, typically gone through complete fermentation, up to two weeks, sometimes a month, has the strongest taste. Oolong tea is in between. Personally, I prefer Oolong. Although Oolong has a taste more akin to green tea than to red tea, it likewise lingers with the rosy, sweet aroma of red tea and lacks the stridently grassy notes that typify green tea. From the nutrition’s point of view, especially measured by the amount of antioxidants (anti-aging) in tea, green tea ranks higher than Oolong and red tea, because it goes through less process, therefore, the less damage of antioxidants.

To brew a good cup of tea, the quality and temperature of the water is quite critical. First thing, heat the water to a boil, then cool it to about 80C (wait about 1 or 2 min), then the water is ready to use for brewing tea. The water temperature is very critical, especially for green tea—scorching water can leave bitter taste in the tea.

So, you need to own a water kettle, I realize it is not a necessity for many here at US. In Beijing, where I grew up, we used to boil the tap water and drank after it cooled down to the room temperature. A water kettle was a must in the kitchen, second only to wok, even for the non-tea-drinking family. I remember the first time with my professor on the campus of University of Maryland, she casually bent over to take a dip when we passed the water fountain—this simple act shocked me so much that I was speechless, and lost my conversation! Drinking tap water was an absolute no-no in China, much worse than eating without washing your hands—as my mother put it. This should have only happened to a little kid, never my well-educated professor! My parents, after nearly two decades living in the US, still boil the tap water before drinking it. It is obviously not for good hygiene any more, it is for the “taste”...

No matter how many gains tea drinking brings, one can't benefit from it if one doesn't like the taste. The good news is there are many flavored tea, some call them craving tea, available nowadays at the market: such as tea infused with fruity flavors like peach, blueberry, apple cider; also various dessert flavors like lemon pie, candy bar, chocolate mint, ... just to name a few. I've tried every Lipton-brand flavored-green tea available at Wal-Mart, the peach tea is my favorite, although I prefer just plain green tea.

The taste of tea is something you can learn to adapt to. Before my family emigrated to US, I learned to drink coffee because I wanted to be socially acceptable after being told that everybody in the US drinks coffee and beer (I never like beer despite all the effect). Coffee would have failed me had it not been for all the condiments, especially hazelnut cream. Drinking flavored tea can be the first step that leads you into the real tea world, so long the tea is from *Camellia sinensis*. Read the label.

Chinese drink their tea hot, even in the hot summer day. Chinese know that each food item has its own energy or temperature (this belongs to another topic—Chinese medicinal food). Tea has a cool energy which means it can counteract on the heat after it settles in your body, so hot tea is an appropriate beverage, especially in the summer months.



To fully appreciate the art of tea drinking, you should go to a tea ceremony, such as Gong Fu Tea, at least once. Sometimes, they may push to sell tea to you at the end of the experience—similar to the time-share sale at some resorts here. Don't feel obligated, only purchase when you like the taste. Or simply join my Chinese Culture class, no obligation, only great experience!

I was in Lijiang, Yunnan province, a few years ago, on a fabulous, three course tea show. The first course was bitter tea, the second was sweet, the third one was called meditating tea—it was bitter when you first tasted the tea, turned sweet in your mouth after the tea was swallowed. I was so engrossed by the complicated taste, and made the purchase of the third tea. To this day, I haven't been

able to replicate the taste in my own kitchen! So, make sure to obtain the instruction/ingredients, and learn the how-to before jumping to the purchase.

Like Chinese Calligraphy, the art of tea has been elevated by the cultivated Chinese, such as the Daoist philosophers and Buddhist monks, they have imbued tea drinking with greater meaning than is applied to any other beverage. That is why tea is a vital part of Chinese culture. From the taste itself to the way it is served, tea drinking, I think, reflects the very character of the Chinese. Many sophisticated poets were inspired to write about tea. So, I like to end this letter with a poem from Lu Tong, a Tang dynasty poet, famous for his description of the joy of drinking tea. His poem is entitled "Thanks to Imperial Censor Meng for His Gift of Freshly Picked Tea:"



*The first cup caresses my dry lips and throat
 The second shatters the walls of my lonely sadness
 The third searches the dry rivulets of my soul to find the stories of five thousand scrolls
 With the fourth the pain of past injustice vanishes through my pores
 The fifth purifies my flesh and bone
 With the sixth I am in touch with the immortals
 The seventh gives such pleasure I can hardly bear
 The fresh wind blows through my wings
 As I make my way to Penglai***

So, sit back and relax, enjoy a cup of tea!

* Because of the page limit, the white tea and Pu-Er tea are not mentioned in this letter.

**Penglai is a mystical land found in Chinese mythology, a synonym for paradise, or seventh heaven.