

Tea: Varieties and Types

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Introduction

Tea (*Camellia sinensis*) is one of the widely consumed beverages in India and across the globe. From the archaeological evidence, the plant is originated in China and India (Assam region) around 6000 years ago. Then the tea travelled to Japan to Great Britain to all over the world. Tea is the second highest beverage consumed after water. It has been imbibed in cultures of various countries and is consumed in different forms. Previously, tea was used for culinary purpose; people used to chew the tea leaves and consume it with food grains. However, around 1500 years ago, it has been consumed as a beverage. In China, tea bricks were used instead of tea powder in early years. People used to break the required quantity of the brick and use it with hot water to drink.

Consumption of tea became worldwide when European traders introduced the tea in Europe in 16th century. During that time, there was increased colonization by Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and Britishers. They introduced the tea drinking culture in their colonies. Its aroma and tempting taste resulted the habituation of the tea across the globe. At that time, China was the only nation growing tea. So, British used to trade tea with silver. However, it was a costly deal for British. So, they offered opium in exchange of the tea. Opium consumption became addiction in China, and they were not happy with this. This situation resulted the Opium War in which Chinese were defeated by British. British were able to trade the tea without any terms.

Today, tea is consumed in various forms across the globe. In India, crushed black tea leaves are consumed with milk, sugar and spices. In Morocco, there is a tradition of preparing tea mixed with fresh mint and sugar and pouring it from the height of 12 inches

in the cup. In China, tea is offered in porcelain cups and in Taiwan, tea is consumed in form of ice tea mixed with small balls made of tapioca or fruit jelly.

Varieties and Types

There are many varieties of the tea having peculiar aroma, taste, colour, brewing quality, etc. There is a common confusion among people related to the varieties, cultivars and types of the tea. Variety is the species of any plant which is naturally grown while the cultivars are the species which grow due to human intervention, i.e., by inbreeding and crossbreeding techniques. Types of tea does not depend on the plant but on the picking of the leaves and the level of oxidation done. The basic types of tea are black tea, green tea, oolong tea, white tea and Pu-erh tea.

Varieties

There are number of varieties and cultivars of tea cultivated. Among them there are three major varieties of the tea plant viz. *Sinensis* (small leaf), *Cambodi* (medium leaf) and *Assamica* (large leaf).

Sinensis, the Latin name for the small-leaf cultivar, means "Chinese." It's the most popular kind in China, Taiwan, and Japan. Green teas, oolong teas, and certain black teas are made from small-leaf type tea plants, which grow as shrubs. They have more subtle and aromatic tastes.

Cambodi tea (*C. sinensis* var. *parvifolia*) is the tiny tree with multiple stems with leaves that are between those of the Assam and Chinese kinds. It's sometimes described as a cross between Assam and China plants. It is not widely used tea variety.

Most widely consumed tea is Assam tea (*C. sinensis* var. *assamica* or *C. assamica*). It is predominantly grown in Assam region. Its origin is in Northeast India, Myanmar, Vietnam and South China. Average annual rainfall required is 250 to 380 cm. It can be grown at the elevation ranging from 45 to 60 m above mean sea level (MSL). This tea has got strong malty flavour and bright colour. It is slightly stimulant and act as a tonic as it contains caffeine (ranges around 60-112mg/240ml).

Types

Black tea is the most popular type of tea in the Western world, accounting for up to 85% of total tea consumption. In comparison to other teas, black tea has been fully oxidised and has a darker look, stronger flavour, and higher caffeine level. Black tea has a caffeine concentration that is around half that of coffee. Green tea on other hand is not oxidized as its leaves are heated soon after picking to remove the enzymes responsible for oxidation. Most of the antioxidants, minerals and vitamins are preserved in the green tea. As the color of the processed tea is green, it is referred as 'green tea'. Oolong tea is semi oxidized tea, so its texture comes between black tea and green tea. It is allowed to sit for 2-4 hours before the heating to oxidation. White tea has had the least amount of processing of all the teas. Only the unopened buds and immature silver-fuzzed leaves are used, and they are simply dried and withered. White tea yields a light-colored, mild-flavored brew. It has a lower caffeine concentration than green tea and is regarded to have a high quantity of antioxidants. Pu-erh tea is a unique sort of tea that originates in China's Yunan province and is recognised for its earthy flavour. It's created using tea picked from wild tea trees rather than cultivated bushes, and the leaves are fermented by pressing raw leaves together and then keeping them until they're ready. Depending on the amount of oxidation permitted throughout the process, Pu-erh tea can be either black or green.

In addition to above, there is also a special category known as tisane or herbal tea where infusion of leaves or flower of plants other than tea are used. Though such beverages are referred as tea, they are not the purist form of the tea. One of the widely used example of such tea is Yerba mate from Argentina where leaves of holly tree from South American forests are used. Usually, the caffeine content in such tea (tisane) is usually low.

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