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It's hot! Total-tea

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Tea.

The word is synonymous with cozy afternoons, long conversations, straw hats and fine china.

It's also associated with some of history's most notable political movements and interesting characters. Even coffee drinkers will admit, tea has been an intrinsic part of everyday life. But appreciation of this leafy elixir has only just begun to brew.

More than 5,000 years after tea was discovered by Chinese Emperor Shen Nung, the libation is only now regaining the status it held as spiritual and homeopathic healer.

As tea sales surge, it begs the question: Why now the sudden outpouring of love for tea?

We all know tea is tasty. But it's only recently that we have found out that it is also healthy. In our diet- and appearance-obsessed society, tea offers people what other liquids – even the purest water – can't.

"People knew if you were sick, drink tea. If you're stressed, drink tea. If you have fever, drink tea," says Joe Simrany, president of the Tea Association of the USA. "What people didn't know is that tea helps prevent coronary disease, lowers insulin levels in diabetics and lowers the risk of cancer. It's one thing after another."

Researchers have found that tea flavonoids, a compound with antioxidant properties, can help fight and prevent a range of illnesses. Studies have shown, for instance, that a daily cup of black tea reduces the risk of heart attack by 44 percent. That 2.5 cups of tea per day drop rectal cancer risk by 60 percent. And a daily eight-ounce serving of tea reduces kidney stone growth by 14 percent.

Today, tea is a \$5.4 billion industry. And on any given day, 127 million Americans will drink a cup. But it isn't English Breakfast, Earl Grey or Lemon Zinger being served up or sought after anymore.

"Just like wine, tea has exotic specialty markets," says Joe. "That stems from the global gourmet food trend of people seeking out unique tastes and new experiences."

Much like gourmet cooks, teaophiles want premium grown and intricately blended teas. Some of the most popular include organic Darjeeling from India and Rooibos Chocolate Mint from Africa.

While packaged tea bags will remain popular because of convenience, they are inferior to loose-leaf teas. What's in demand today are limited-edition flushes (the term for the first harvest) and rare vintages, many of which can garner up to \$30 per ounce.

Because of an increasingly well-informed consumer, hard-to-find teas are showing up in everyday shops and markets. That demand is catapulting the popularity of quaint tea houses opening everywhere from Russia to Rhinebeck.

In 1991, there were 200 tea salons, mostly in metropolitan cities such as L.A., New York, Chicago

and Boston. Today, more than 1,700 are scattered throughout the country. Many are flourishing in small towns.

On Sept. 1, Agnes Devereux opened The Village Tearoom in New Paltz.

"Tea is undergoing a renaissance right now," says Agnes, who offers high-end loose teas. "Tea is something that is very ceremonial and that is attractive to people. They come in, get their tea ... sit and relax."

Inside her teahouse, customers are greeted by warm-hued walls in clay, celery and slate. Small wooden tables are built for long breaks and deep conversation. There are two floors: Downstairs consists of a sitting area, a children's room (equipped with chalkboard) and a cupboard full of tea tins for sale. Upstairs is an intimate space perfect for old friends and new lovers.

The Village Tearoom sits almost directly across the street from Starbucks, the king of all coffee chains. But the vibe couldn't be more different.

"They're generic," Agnes says while sipping peppermint tea. "They want to get people in and out. This is a place to linger. You can't rush a pot of tea."

In this bustling college town, that thought isn't lost on customers.

"This place is cute and unique," says Aurora Decrosta, who was enjoying a recent afternoon at The Village Tearoom with friend Kristen Tierney. The 18-year-olds from New Paltz were also relishing slices of chocolate cake and buttery scones. "Plus, they have a large variety of tea."

But the 20-plus tea selection isn't the only tasty goodness The Village Tearoom offers. "Afternoon Tea" comes on a tiered tray. On the bottom plate rest delectable finger sandwiches: chicken and apple chutney on multigrain bread, goat cheese and roasted vegetable spread on sourdough and house-cured salmon with dill cream cheese on pumpernickel. On the second plate sits clotted cream, jam and a large oatmeal scone. On the top, an assortment of cookies. (It costs \$18).

Agnes makes a point to mention that all her edibles are created from local organic ingredients.

While chatting about their scrumptious treats, Aurora and Kristen talk about tea versus coffee.

"Afternoon tea is classy," says Aurora. "Coffee is only classy if you're in Europe."

While these two might seem young to be enjoying such a refined drink, they are just part of a growing niche of tea lovers.

"Tea is more popular than I thought," says Agnes. "We find men in their 30s and 40s, young women, college students, coming here. It's great to see so many people enjoying tea. It's so gratifying."

Fit to a tea

Many teahouses, markets and shops in our area offer a unique and diverse variety of tea. Here is just a sampling:

Adams Fairacre Farms, Newburgh, 569-0303, www.adamsfarms.com
G.H. Ford Tea Co., Wappingers Falls, 298-8900, www.ghfordtea.com
Hudson Valley Coffee Roasters, Newburgh, www.hudsonvalleyroasters.com
Jeanie Bean British Tea Shop, Clinton Corners, 266-3800
Pleasant Stone Farm, Middletown, 343-4040
A Spot of Tea, Rhinebeck, 876-1842, www.aspotoftea.biz
Village Coffee & Tea Shop Inc., Apple Valley Village, Milford, Pa., 570-296-866
The Village Tearoom, New Paltz, 255-3434, www.thevillagetearoom

Tea time(line)

2737 B.C.: Chinese Emperor Shen Nung discovers tea when dried leaves fall into his boiling water.

350 A.D.: A Chinese dictionary cites tea for the first time as "erh ya."

593: Tea seeds and leaves are carried to Japan by Japanese priests who studied in China.

648-749: Japanese monk Gyoki plants the first tea bushes in 49 Buddhist temple gardens.

1422-1502: The Japanese tea ceremony emerges. First created by Murata Shuko, the ceremony is called Cha-no-yu, literally meaning "hot water tea." From this, tea elevates to an art form.

1597: Tea is mentioned for the first time in an English translation of Dutch navigator Jan Hugo van Linschooten's travels, in which he refers to tea as chaa.

1615: The Chinese embassy in Moscow presents Czar Alexis with several chests of tea.

1652: Tea comes to England and replaces ale as the nation's most-popular drink.

1664: The British take over New Amsterdam, rename it New York, and British tea traditions come to the New World.

1675: While tea has been available to the wealthy, it has now become available in common food shops throughout Holland.

1680: Social critic Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, the Dutch Marquise de Seven, makes the first mention of adding milk to tea.

1690: The first tea is sold publicly in Massachusetts.

1717: Thomas Twining serves up tea at Tom's Coffee House in London.

1767: The British begin taxing tea imported to America.

1773: Men dressed as American Indians board British ships into Boston Harbor and throw more than 300 chests of tea into the sea. The "Boston Tea Party" protests the British tax of tea and leads to the Revolutionary War.

1826: English Quaker John Horniman introduces the first retail tea in sealed, lead-lined packages.

1833: By an act of British Prime Minister Charles Grey (the second Earl Grey and namesake of the famous tea), the East India Company loses its monopoly in the trade (mostly tea) with China.

1840: Anna, Duchess of Bedford, is credited with creating afternoon tea, when she began to take tea and a light snack around 4 p.m. to ward off "that sinking feeling."

1856: Tea is planted in and around Darjeeling, India.

1859: A&P starts as the Great American Tea Company store and buys whole clipper shipments, selling tea more cheaply than other merchants.

1870: Twinings of England begins to blend tea for uniformity.

1880: Fine hotels begin to serve tea in tea rooms and tea courts. Late in the afternoon, Victorian ladies would meet friends and suitors for tea and conversation.

1890: Thomas Lipton buys tea estates in Ceylon in order to sell tea at a "responsible" price.

1908: The tea bag and iced tea are invented in the United States.

1909: Thomas Lipton begins blending and packaging his tea in New York.

Compiled from Tea Association of the USA, www.2basnob.com and www.stashtea.com