Wandering the Web: How About a (Virtual) Cuppa? A Highly Selective Introduction to Tea Online

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Wandering the Web — How About a (Virtual) Cuppa? A Highly Selective Introduction to Tea Online

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Tea Is Good for You

The second most popular beverage on Earth? Yes, tea. Second only to water, tea is the most-consumed beverage on the planet. Why? From help with weight loss to stress relief (there’s a symbiotic relationship there!) to fighting free radicals to improved exercise endurance and more, the humble cuppa — elsewhere in the world the most-consumed beverage — is coming into its own in the United States.

The Blog at HuffPost Healthy Living posted “6 amazing health benefits of tea” (2013). Time magazine online touted “13 reasons tea is good for you” in their Health and Family section (2012). WebMD created a short video clip reporting on the increase in tea consumption and published online articles on the health benefits of different types of tea (2013). After viewing the WebMD material, you can even take a quiz to test your knowledge on green tea! Dr. Oz and Fox News also showcase information on the health benefits of tea.

Getting interested? Good. I’ll put the kettle on, and we’ll learn some more over a nice hot cup of tea. What kind of tea? Glad you asked! We have lots of choices — there are literally thousands of blends of tea in the world, although true tea derives from one plant, camellia sinensis, and a varietal, camellia sinensis assamica. Differences in flavor, color, and benefits derive largely from the processing after the tea leaves are picked.

The four most common types of tea in the West are black (most oxidized or fermented leaves), green (leaves are steamed), oolong (or wu long, fermented, then pan-fried), white (least cured or fermented), and recently gaining in popularity, pu-erh (fermented, raw, or aged tea, often sold in cakes or bricks). It is interesting to note that black tea, as it is popularly known in the West, is referred to as red tea in its country of origin, and indeed the origin of all teas, China.

A (Very) Few Tea Vendors (among Many): A Drop in the Vast Teapot of Online Tea Vendors

Tea grows best in high, moist elevations, and the camellia sinensis plant can be found all over the world. According to the Tea Association of the USA:

Much of the world’s tea is grown in mountainous areas 3,000-7,000 feet above sea level, situated between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn in mineral-rich soil. Leading tea-producing countries include Argentina, China, India, Indonesia, Kenya Malawi, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Taiwan (Tea Fact Sheet, 2013).

There are a number of small, artisanal tea gardens in the United States, but the best-known commercial U. S. tea producer is the Charleston Tea Plantation, owned by Bigelow Tea, which produces American Classic Tea.

You say you like flavored teas? Well, sit back and take a fortifying sip or two, this could take a while. Popular online tea vendor Adagio Teas boasts more than 57,166 blends, as of May 2014. How is this possible? Brilliant social media marketing: Adagio customers create and rate tea blends online, often based on popular culture fandom. For example, TV series fandom blends include highly subjective and wildly varied teas based on characters from Sherlock, Dr. Who, and the late, lamented Firefly, to name but a few of the popular groups of blends.

Teavana, now owned by Starbucks, is opening tea specialty stores following the phenomenally successful Starbucks coffee bar model. Originally in upscale malls or freestanding stores, with colorful walls of tea tins and heavy on the Asian style tea accessories, Teavana was perhaps the first national chain to popularize and yuppify tea. Teavana advertises more than 100 teas on their Website.

On the less trendy side, don’t be put off by the crowded, narrow screenspace of the Upton Tea Imports Website (as of this writing). Compared to the more colorful imagery and photos of teas to be found on other vendor sites, Upton comes off as dowdy as Aunt Matilda’s tea

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parties for the blue-haired set. The Upton difference, however, is in the details. Every one of “the 480 loose teas and tisanes” offered is as eloquently described, carefully sourced, and thoughtfully priced as on other, flashier tea vendor Websites. Their extensive catalog is available in a simple plain white paper format or online as a PDF. Upton Tea Imports is serious about the quality of its tea sources.

Somewhere between the busyness of Upton Tea Imports and the colorful graphics of Adagio Teas or Teavana is the stately yet welcoming Harney & Sons, a family business in upstate New York that imports and blends tea for international royalty — and the rest of us — at reasonable prices. Experience Palm Court, blended for the Plaza Hotel’s elegant room of the same name, or Paris, an hommage to French Breakfast Tea that adds that je ne sais quoi to your morning cuppa. A key to navigating the various tea varieties on the Harney & Sons Website (as of this writing): Click the photo of the white cup of tea nestled in tea leaves — that links to the main page for each blend. Like most online tea vendors, you can try a variety of Harney & Sons original blends in inexpensive sample packets.

Another friendly tea vendor is the English Tea Store, which carries a variety of established brands from Barry’s to Typhoo, in addition to a variety of established brands from Barry’s to Typhoo, in addition to inexpensive sample packets. You can navigate the various tea varieties on the English Tea Store Website (as of this writing): Click the photo of the white cup of tea nestled in tea leaves — that links to the main page for each blend. Like most online tea vendors, you can try a variety of Harney & Sons original blends in inexpensive sample packets.

Beyond suggesting online sites to buy tea for your patrons, there is a growing social media aspect of tea for the novice as well as the connoisseur. Care to debate the merits of raw versus aged pu-erh? Want recommendations on fair-trade, organically grown white tea? Confused about the caffeine content in green tea? No worries — there’s a forum — and an app — for that. Tea drinkers have always been a social bunch, that much is evident from tea’s illustrious — and common-garden-variety — history (see suggested reading below). Technology has made reaching out to fellow tea-lovers amazingly easy. Tea reviews, tea swaps, tea FAQs, tea Q&As, and virtual tea-tastings abound at sites like Steepster and TeaChat.

Thirsty for more information on this near-miraculous beverage? If you are planning a program about tea, there are some wonderful visuals to illustrate the impact of tea on SharePowered’s “It’s Tea Time: A Collection of Tea Infographics,” or you can add to the wildly creative tea images already posted on Pinterest or Tumblr. From tea parties (of the china teacup variety) to the politics of tea (the beverage, not the party), there have been scores of books written that detail the rise of tea-growing regions and related blogs:

World of Tea — www.worldoftea.org
World Tea News — www.worldteanews.com

Vendors

Vendors are a very small corner of the huge online tea world.

Adagio Teas — www.adagio.com
Arbor Teas — www.arborteas.com
Art of Tea — www.artoftea.com
Charleston Tea Plantation, American Classic Tea — www.charlestonplantation.com
Culinary Teas — www.culinaryteas.com
English Tea Store — www.englishteastore.com/
Harney & Sons — www.harney.com
Mariage Frères (France; UK site) — www.mariagefreres.com/boutique/UK/welcome.html
Mighty Leaf — www.mightyleaf.com
Teavana — www.teavana.com
Teavivre — www.teavivre.com
Upton Tea Imports — www.uptonteainc.com

Books

A Decent Cup of Tea, by Malachi McCormick, Clarkson Potter, 1991.
The Book of Tea (expanded edition), by Okakura Kakuzo and Bruce Richardson, Benjamin Press, 2011.

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TeaMuse, a monthly newsletter.
TeaCritic, reviews of various teas; Tea Class (www.teaclass.com) includes TeaMap, a tearoom directory; TeaChef, recipes using tea; aspects of tea growing regions.

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Organizations

American Tea Masters Association — teamasters.org/
Association of Tea Bloggers — www.teabloggers.com
Fair Trade USA, Product Certification Tea Program — fairtradeusa.org/certification/producers/tea
Tea Association of Canada/Association du Thé du Canada — www.tea.ca
Tea Association of the USA, Tea Council USA, Specialty Tea Institute — www.teausa.com
United Kingdom Tea Council — www.tea.co.uk
United States League of Tea Growers — usgrowntea.wordpress.com

References


