

New varieties, new flavours, new fans - India is currently in the middle of quite a mad tea party. And our world is brimming with new possibilities!

by Rachel Lopez

EVERYWHERE YOU look, it's tea time. On TV, even as the chaiwalla's milky brew has become a call to arms in the run-up to the elections, Kareena Kapoor and Anushka Sharma, glossy locks a-flying, are endorsing green tea as lighter, healthier and hip. Down supermarket aisles, shelves usually devoted to kadak chai, masala chai, and value-pack CTC are making room for little boxes of green and flavoured tea. Gourmet stores are stocking Japanese sencha, African rooibos and Sri Lankan blends alongside imported brands of homegrown Darjeeling and Assam. Doctors are prescribing white and green versions of the beverage for stress, hypertension, diabetes and post-chemo cases. Even at shady slimming clinics, the first response to weight loss is now a light herbal tea. Restaurants are offering longer and longer tea selections - five-star hotels practically throw a party when shipments of prized first-flush leaves arrive. Once-lonely tea enthusiasts are finding more takers for their boutique blends, handcrafted infusions, workshops and tasting sessions.

You could argue that it's always tea time in India. Our chai-chugging compatriots remained mostly loyal to the beverage despite the profusion of cafés and coffee bars over the last decade. But you can't deny that coffee seemed comparatively hipper, its beans, roasts and equipment more suited to conspicuous consumption. Now, it seems, to prefer tea is to be cool again - but only if it's Tea V2.0: no rhapsodising over rain and pakoras, no cutting-chai clichés, no milk, no sugar, and no dunking biscuits.

GOING GREEN

"Tea is the gentle drink that has gently taken over the world," says Neetu Sarin who runs the boutique brand Tea of Life. And in India, at least green tea has been instrumental in that takeover.

Almost every brand, big or boutique, Indian or imported, hawks some variation of it. It's obvious why. For the health-conscious (but change-averse) urban Indian, a cup or two of the stuff is an easier inclusion into daily life than, say, a morning run, cardio time, counting calories, a breast self-exam or actually taking it easy. Anamika Singh of Anandini Himalaya Tea, which now retails export quality fine teas from Dharamsala, sees the brew as "a slow-down drink" as opposed to the energy boost of coffee. But Radhika Shah, proprietor of Radhika's Fine Teas, puts it best: "It's the lifestyle solution to our lifestyle problems."

A NEW LEAF



Black Tea

The most oxidised and processed of all tea varieties. It gives the strongest aroma and flavour, and retains its qualities for several years. This is the kind of tea that, when consumed in excess, will cause acidity.



White Tea

The least oxidised of all teas, it gives brews a slightly sweet flavour. It comes from the buds and younger leaves of the camellia sinensis plant that have been allowed to wither in natural sunlight before processing. Many believe white tea can protect you from cancers, arthritis and osteoporosis.



Green Tea

This is when the leaf has undergone minimal oxidation. Many believe it to have anti-ageing benefits as it contains more flavonoids than the same volume of fresh fruits, vegetable juices or wine.



Oolong Tea

Tea that has undergone a unique process, including withering under strong sun and oxidation before curling and twisting. Its taste can range from sweet and fruity to distinctly smoky.



PHOTOS: THINKSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, BETTYIMAGES

NEW TO THE BREW?

- Don't be scared.** Try something new, say tea experts. Buy the smallest sample you can. If you dislike the taste, you've not ruined a meal or your day.
- Don't use Evian.** Use filtered water instead. Bottled water is pumped with minerals that interfere with the taste of the tea, often ruining a good leaf.
- Don't boil it all.** Black tea can take boiling temperatures. But green and white teas are delicate. You'll ruin the flavour and waste your money.
- Don't dunk your tea.** Instead, put your leaves in a cup and pour water just under 90 degrees C for green tea and under 75 degrees C for white tea.
- Don't steep too long.** Three minutes is enough to release its essence without making your drink tannic and bitter.
- Don't look only at location.** Quality varies widely even within Assam and Darjeeling teas. What's expensive might not always be to your taste and liking. Try them all, pick what you like and aim to taste small-batch, single-estate versions.

Even if you're not buying into the green-tea obsession - its health benefits are, after all, only loosely backed by science - you've probably considered picking up some kind of non-traditional tea or know someone who has. Vikram Grover, South Asia marketing head of Tata Global Beverages, says launching Tetley flavoured green-tea bags was an intuitive decision. "Of course people are increasingly health conscious," he says. "But India is also getting younger. People are spending large amounts of time out of the home, out of their comfort zone, and are thus more willing to break a habit and try something new."

FACTORING IN FLAVOUR

If something is new but familiar, half the battle is already won. That explains why the new leaf has captured our fancy faster than the bean ever did. It also requires less effort than proper coffee, for which you need, at the minimum, a percolator, and at most, your own roaster, grinder and espresso machine. It's relatively risk-free - "It's easier to try Japanese tea than a Japanese meal," says gourmet-foods importer Anil Chandhok of Chenab. Then, there's the fact that it's mostly water. "If you don't like it, what have you really lost?" asks Sarin.

For many, what was lost was a sense of drinking something as tasty as chai. "The palate remains a barrier," Grover admits. So additional flavourings have been added to make the medicine go down. Of Tetley's green-tea range, the flavours that do well are honey lemon (a perceived double dose of health and taste), aloe vera and regular green. Typhoo advertises its flavours as Moroccan mint, jasmine and lemongrass; Lipton's variants have jasmine, mint or lemon.



Grover sees green and other new kinds of teas as the secondary tea at home, one that won't replace your morning cuppa but can become your afternoon indulgence. Flavoured-tea in tea bags are also likely to be your 'office-wala chai'. Many get their first sip of it at the workplace, where choices are limited, a colleague is likely to influence you to try something new, and the need for a quick break is higher. "All you need really is hot water from the coffee machine," Grover says.

Don't dunk and discard. Most good tea bags are good for two cups. And leaves have enough potency for two proper servings before they deliver a weaker brew.

four years ago, Swasti Aggarwal, who heads the store chain's north zone, says sales have swelled in the last 18 months. Customers buy tea and tisanes (herbal infusions that don't contain actual tea leaves but are drunk like tea) for house parties. "The Chado store within Foodhall retails a White Pearl Jasmine tea for ₹64,000 a kilo and finds takers," she adds.

COMING TO A BOIL

Once sold on the idea that tea can be milk-less, sugarless and delicious, Indians have been only too happy to take their enthusiasm further. At upmarket gourmet stores like Foodhall, where there's a dedicated tea bar but no café for lattes, the shelves stock 100 varieties of tea, from Sri Lankan Basilur, and UK's Newby and Clipper to the Japanese Clearspring - brands largely unfamiliar even

Tea enterprises have popped up online and in the real world. Snigdha Manchanda of Tea Trunk retails signature blends like rose oolong and vanilla black, holds tea-appreciation workshops and leads people on Chai Walks that cover iconic tea locations in Mumbai. Tea Culture Of The World retails online and delivers your fix of full-bodied pu-er and flowery tie gua yin teas across India. "At the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower in Mumbai, the first flush is greeted with much fanfare when it arrives late April and restaurants serving the teas see an upswing all the way until July," says deputy general manager Parveen Chandra Kumar.

WHICH TEA SHOULD YOU TRY?



READING THE LEAVES

Don't waste time. Good leaves retain their flavours for only six months. So pretend the Queen is dropping and finish up your good samples while they're still fresh.

Chandhok, who imports the organic brands Clipper and Clearspring, says he's yet to see a tea flavour fail to get attention. Estates like Anamika Singh's Manjee Valley have come around to the idea that there is finally a local market (albeit a tiny one) for export-quality teas, even as far away as Jalandhar and Ludhiana. Raghav Gupta, who imports Basilur, has catered tea at high-profile weddings in Udaipur, where the menu focused on light eats. He says tea is slowly starting to replace traditional gifts like chocolate and mithai when wedding cards are sent out these days.

Radhika Shah of Radhika's Fine Teas was kept busy all through last year's wedding season – between October and December she supplied fine boutique blends to 35 weddings, bundling up 400 to 1,000 tea favours for each of them. She's also catered to a bachelor party, at which the gents skipped booze for aphrodisiac teas. "I've served high tea in Rajkot, flying in for the day with 54 kilos of raw material for a group of intelligent young women," Shah says. "I could write it off as just trendy, but I've been called back five times, which means they're definitely interested in the tea."

For those in the business, this is reason to raise a teacup in celebration. But there's much to be done. "My teas taste like 24-year-old whisky," Gupta claims. "But this is a country where people will still ask the equivalent of 'kya mileage hai?'" he says referring to value for money. Chandhok laments that tea and coffee imports are slapped with a 111 per cent duty, which more than doubles the retail price, limiting sales. Both lessen the blow on customers by promoting imported tea as being still cheaper per cup than coffee or tea at a café. A 700-gram box from Basilur will make 70 cups; Clipper teabags are good for two cups and work out to ₹25 each.

The promoters are also well aware that chai drinkers need plenty of hand-holding before they graduate to their wares. At the Taj, sandglass timers at the table helpfully indicate how long your black, oolong, green or white tea should be brewed and the staff is well trained to field questions from novice and pedant alike. Sarin needs to keep reminding people at her tastings that "natural flavours added to teas are gentler than synthetic additives".

Shah's tea samplers feature

CHAI HI CHAI

To help chai lovers, here's a selection of some places where you can drink your brew of choice:

- **Chaayos (DLF Cyber City, Gurgaon):** This chai-café chain offers unusual options such as Hari Mirch chai and Aam Papad chai.
- **T'Pot Café (Malviya Nagar):** From the regular kulhad masala tea to the more gourmet hibiscus or white tea – take your pick.
- **Cha Bar (Connaught Place):** Choose between the Truckwali chai, the Bollywood chai or the more exotic Moroccan chai, organic teas, tea infusions and decaf teas.
- **Just For Chai (Gurgaon):** A member of the Kolkata tea board, it offers as many as 60 varieties of tea, from your regular masala chai to premium Darjeeling teas.
- **The Tea Studio:** Run by Bud-white, it sells premium gourmet varieties that are a combination of flowers, fruit peels and extracts, spices and herbs blended with tea. All known to be very healthy.
- **Anandini Himalaya Tea Boutique (Shahpur Jat):** For their limited-edition Handmade Needle tea (apparently each leaf and a bud is plucked during a certain time of the month, at a particular time of the day, from a certain number of bushes and hand-rolled by women).
- **The Tea Place (MGF Metropolitan Mall, Saket):** Check out the green tea with passionfruit flavour or try some white tea with strawberry.
- **The Tea Lounge (Taj Palace Hotel):** For an English-style high-tea experience with selections from Darjeeling to green teas from Japan and Vietnam.

(Compiled by Veenu Singh)

guides to drinking – which blend works best for what time of the day or what mood you're in. She hopes that Indians will one day be able to choose the right tea to drink for their ailments. Most brands keep their quantities deliberately small, debut with the less complicated tea bags and offer samplings aplenty. Basilur made it to Nita Ambani's VVIP box at last year's T20 match, their Foodhall display has an assistant to help customers make selections, and they flood the shelves with new flavours so that fans keep returning.

Some challenges are harder than others. Teas, especially the lighter, more aromatic and floral ones continue to be seen as a woman's drink. "Green tea is also associated with body-shape management, so more women opt for it as a weight-loss tool," Grover adds. Typhoo partnered with

Lakmé Fashion Week this year. Social media chatter about tea is mostly female-driven. But there are some surprises. "I thought the demographic for Basilur would be women between age 24 and 40," he says. "But I'm seeing teens and even 50-year-old men ordering it for their offices." Sarin adds that her tea workshops see equal attendance from both sexes. "It's a misconception that tea is not for macho men," she says.

WHAT ELSE IS BREWING?

A lot has changed very quickly. Anamika Singh's tea company is only 18 months old, but she says that "even three years ago, people did not have the palate for fine tea." Now a small quantity of their export-only leaves is set aside for sale in India. "It's something you can keep alongside your existing tea," she adds. Aggarwal, who's been closely watching the sales at Foodhall, predicts that still more will ditch milk and sugar; and oolong will be the next flavour of the season.

"I see tea drinkers going up the value chain in four or five years," says Kumar at the Taj in Mumbai. This might pose a problem for both old and new fans of good tea. There's already a worldwide shortage of premium tea – only a handful of countries grow the leaf, and premium yields are hard to expand without compromising quality. To top it all, the demand for premium Indian tea is rising in the US. Premium (and pricey) Indian tea shops selling single-estate teas and Assam blends have come up along the East Coast and the Starbucks-owned Teavana tea restaurants are fuelling the sale of quality teas there.

This is already forcing Indian companies to source tea for Indian consumption from Kenya and Sri Lanka. And as more Indians discover premium teas, it's likely that some of us will be buying Indian leaves that have been exported abroad only to be packaged, possibly flavoured and shipped back to us at a hefty premium.

"It's time to take note that some of the world's best tea is grown right here in our nation," urges Sarin. "We need to discover what we have and drink it with pride!"

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