



Sophistication, Down *to a Tea*

By Frank Weber

Canadians are
brewing up a new
taste for tea

One of the most widely consumed beverages in the world (second only to water) has been delivering warmth to the cold, relief to the thirsty and cooling comfort to the exhausted for five millennia – but we are just starting to understand the many faces of this beverage now.

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Ahhh, the wonders of tea. As complex as wine, regarded with the same respect and traded for thousands of dollars for some rare brews, yet only pennies a cup to most of us. How could we hope to understand everything about this marvelous beverage? Wars have been fought over it. Countries were enslaved to satisfy the appetite for tea in the west. Beautiful artistry and poetry were inspired by it. Ships were built specifically to transport it faster. And, for thousands of years, having tea meant having wealth – you could barter tea for anything.

Our disconnection to tea in North America may very well have begun with “The Boston Tea Party” – an event which triggered the American Revolution. It

became an unpatriotic act to consume tea and the revolt against British taxation moved North Americans to turn to coffee. However, our appetite for the beverage has slowly returned.

MORE CHOICES THAN EVER

In the 1950's, with the industrialization of the tea bag, drinking tea became more convenient. Any dedicated tea drinker would argue that the finest teas will never be available in bags. However, much has changed on that front. Many companies, including Tea Squared, are producing ethically sourced, all-natural teas in biodegradable bags and the choices for the consumer are becoming more numerous by the day. Five thousand years after its

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discovery, quality tea has started to go mainstream in Canada with the arrival of specialty providers and tea shops. Suddenly, hundreds of teas are available and Canadians have started learning about the abundance of health benefits found in the tea plant (*camellia sinensis*). Starbucks has opened its first premium tea boutique in Seattle and also owns the Teavana chain of tea shops. No coffee to be found – just premium loose leaf tea. It doesn't take much to imagine what comes next – more tea shops and better tea all around.

POPULARITY GROWING

Current research available at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada predicts a rise of 40 per cent in Canadian tea consumption by 2020. Those are big numbers by any standards. However, more interesting yet is the fact that this prediction applies to premium tea only. Knowledge is power and an educated consumer is the most powerful driving force. No longer will mediocre tea “dust,” commonly sold as Orange Pekoe grade, suffice. Grocery store shelves will see an increase in loose leaf consumption. Tea aisles have grown significantly over the last few years and quality will triumph.

The demographic of tea drinkers is amongst the widest in any industry. Younger generations are drawn to tea shops and with that, are exposed to a quality rarely found in grocery stores. Anyone who has made the journey from bad tea to good will tell you that going back is impossible. Middle-aged consumers and baby boomers are interested as much in the superior taste as in the health benefits of premium tea and really, for a few cents difference per cup, why wouldn't consumers pick a far better product?

RESTAURANTS CASHING IN

Many restaurateurs understand that loose leaf tea is as easy to produce as tea bags and delivers a superior product and dining experience. However, there are still traditionalists that argue it takes longer to produce loose leaf tea than bagged. But does it really? Let's say it does take longer, perhaps five seconds more, but produces a far better product. The superior product should be reason enough to justify a minuscule investment of time.

The quality aspect is amplified by another: profit. Restaurants can easily

charge premium prices when they serve quality loose leaf tea. In addition, tea sales volumes have been seen to rise as well. Many restaurant owners and managers claim, “we don't sell much tea,” when referring to their existing tea bag

selection. Of course not! If a restaurant were to sell instant coffee instead of coffee made from freshly ground Arabica beans, then coffee sales would suffer.

A restaurant that does not serve high-quality tea is going to be as hard to find as one that still serves instant coffee.

Whether it is in a boutique store, tea shop, major retailer or restaurant, the message from the consumer is clear: serve good tea.

Frank Weber has been consulting restaurants, tea shops and retailers for 15 years. He is the owner of the Toronto-based tea wholesale company Tea Squared. He has long been a source of information, advice and inspiration in the tea industry and has contributed to many educational and tea sommelier programs.

