

Herbal Heaven

The other cup of tea

By Frank Weber

Tea has enjoyed much attention over the last few years and most of this rising popularity has been contributed to green and black teas. However, there are many tasty concoctions out there that are technically not tea. Herbal teas or “tisane” are much coveted and have been consumed around the world for millennia.

A tisane is really any herb, spice or flower that has been infused in water. It might even be a blend of all of the above. The one common denominator among them is that they don't contain any leaves from the actual tea plant — *camellia sinensis*.

Herbal teas are generally caffeine free, with a few exceptions such as yerba mate — a South American herb that contains a stimulant similar to caffeine. Generally speaking, herbal and fruit teas are calming and relaxing and have their own individual sets of benefits. Chamomile and lemon verbena, for example, are soothing to the digestive system while peppermint is cooling. Ginger or echinacea are said to boost the immune system and hibiscus has traditionally been used to lower blood pressure. There are too many herbals out there to list all the supposed medicinal properties and uses. For the most part, the tastiest brews don't focus as much on curing ailments as they do on delighting our senses. Having said that, there are still beneficial side effects to most types of herbal tea.

GREAT CAFFEINE-FREE OPTION

A well-crafted restaurant tea offering should include a fruit tea, one or two herbals and a rooibos blend. Patrons in search of that caffeine-free, after-dinner beverage have long moved up from the obligatory chamomile or peppermint offering. Savvier operators have adjusted by

introducing more interesting blends containing several ingredients. However, many restaurateurs are still missing the additional sales opportunity by not offering enough choice on the caffeine-free side. After all, most tea in restaurants is consumed during dinner and many customers are not looking for that caffeine kick at this time.

The blending of most herbal teas is considered an art form (much like baking) and requires some fine-tuning to come up with the perfect recipe. However, blending and flavouring can be as simple as adding two herbs together, so we encourage some experimentation and who knows — maybe your next favourite brew is already in your pantry. When doing so, you might want to consider using these teas as iced options as well. Fruit blends in particular make for amazing iced tea blends.

HEALTH PLUS FLAVOUR

Two of the more notable categories of herbal teas mentioned above are rooibos and yerba mate. Rooibos (pronounced roy-boss) is indigenous to South Africa and is reported to be an antioxidant powerhouse. Harvested much like the *camellia sinensis* tea leaf but from the Red bush plant, this tisane is thought to be loaded with health

benefits, vitamins and minerals. Rooibos is also very soothing to the digestive system. It is naturally caffeine free, helps maintain bone density, and has been used to clear up skin irritations. Above all, it tastes great. Because plain rooibos has a slightly fruity and well-balanced body, you may find it laced with rich flavours like coconut and vanilla or uplifting notes of citrus or lavender. Rooibos is one of the must haves amongst herbal infusions.

Yerba mate has been around for centuries and was used by the Guarani tribes of South America as a hunger suppressant and immunity booster long before it became a mainstream beverage. Mate culture is prevalent in many South American countries now and yerba mate is often consumed there in special hollow gourds and sipped through metal straws. Modern research has shown that mate contains virtually all vitamins and minerals needed to sustain life. The stimulant in yerba mate (mateine) is similar to caffeine but it is non-addictive and doesn't interfere with sleeping patterns. Plain mate is quite earthy and you may prefer it as a blend with fruit or citrus flavours.

The world of herbal teas is definitely a wonderful one and it can entice us with thousands of different flavour combinations. So, if you are ready to offer your customers a refreshing new hot or iced beverage choice, consider one of these plentiful options with health benefits. You just might help them find a new favourite.

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®. For more information about tea visit: www.teasquared.ca.