

# NOT JUST FOR BREAKFAST ANYMORE

THERE ARE MANY PARALLELS BETWEEN TEA AND WINE, AND ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT IS THE ASTOUNDING DIVERSITY OF STYLES AND INHERENT FOOD-FRIENDLINESS.

BY JANICE FUHRMAN

A

mong the gritty warehouses of Portland, Oregon's Central Eastside district, the Tazo tea company stands out. Even in the parking lot, smells of black pepper, cloves and cinnamon flood your olfactory sense.

Inside, in the Lotus Room, a tea tasting is being led by Keith Hutjens, director of tea procurement at Tazo. Delicate Chinese teapots and a dozen white

porcelain tea bowls are set carefully around a table, each bowl shimmering with tea ranging from pallid yellow to deep brown and many hues in between. Small plates hold dry tea leaves—from long, rolled leaves to short, broken pieces.

"You appraise the leaf, the color in the cup, and the aroma, both by sticking your nose in the cup and by slurping the tea to aerate it and tasting it all the way in the back of your mouth," Hutjens instructs. It almost sounds like a wine tasting.

It's not much of a stretch to find parallels between wine and tea, from growing and blending it to tasting it. Read a thoughtful description of a premium tea and you'll find accounts of "well-rounded, full-bodied flavor," "deep burgundy notes" that "marry well with a wide variety of dishes," as well as "lingering aromas," "exquisite colors" and a "perfect sense of balance." Anyone who has taken the most basic wine course will recognize many of those terms and may instinctively understand what a "tea sommelier" or "tea master" might be. Some of the finest teas today come in packages that list the region of origin, species of tea tree and harvest date.

It isn't just marketing. As Tazo's Hutjens and other tea buyers know, appellation is as important in the world of tea as it is with wine. Regional and even site-specific differences exist for tea leaves just as for grapes. That's why tea buyers travel to tea estates to monitor growing practices, taste new teas and new harvests (unlike winegrapes, tea is harvested several times a year from spring through summer). Most premium

tea farms are located in Asia, many of the finest in cool climates at high altitudes.

"The most influential factors of any tea's quality are weather, varietal of tea tree, terroir and the method of processing," says Joshua Kaiser, founder and tea buyer for Rishi Tea, based in Milwaukee.

## Drink with your nose

All tea springs from the same evergreen, *Camellia sinensis*. What account for the over 3,000 varieties of tea available are the various cultivars, climates, growing conditions and processing methods used once the tea and buds are picked. "How and where tea is grown and the skills of its maker combine to produce a wide mosaic of teas available worldwide," says Michael Cramer, marketing manager at Adagio Teas. "In this way tea is closer to wine than it is coffee."

What comes after tea leaves and buds are picked is what differentiates black, green, Oolong and white teas. Black tea has the greatest exposure to air (oxidation) and white tea has none. Tea flavor lies in the quality of its agricultural product and in the balance of the blend with other tea leaves, herbs, spices or fruits.

Wine devotees are well-suited to appreciate tea's many fine shadings. "There is a definite parallel between wine tasting and tea tasting, especially in rolling the liquid properly over your tongue and letting your palate react to it," says Chas Kroll, executive director of the American Tea Masters Association, which certifies tea masters after an accelerated training course. "A trained tea master with an acute palate would pick up extremely subtle nuances." To gain knowledge of tea, Kroll suggests drinking initially with your nose, as one does with wine—and trying many kinds of tea, as one does with wine.

"Like wine, tea has such subtle intensity and layering of flavors," says Reem Rahim, co-founder with her brother Ahmed, of Numi Tea in Oakland, California.







Loose tea vs. old bags

Purists say loose tea is the only way to go. It is lower-quality teas that are usually stuffed into bags, they say, and the bags are too small to allow for leaf expansion. “You will never find the absolute finest teas in a tea bag,” says Gold.

But these days many high-quality teas come in better-designed bags to allow good water flow and proper leaf expansion. “There is always a level of tea for everyone,” asserts Roy Fong, proprietor of San Francisco’s Imperial Tea Court. “It is hard to argue against an iced tea when it is hot, and tough to fight against a tea bag when you don’t have time for anything else.”

Tea, a cherished beverage for thousands of years, is not static. New products are popping up, such as Rishi’s Grand Cru tea, Numi’s organic Puerh teabags, Tazo’s flavored latte concentrates, larger, pyramid-style tea bags from Adagio and Fully Loaded Tea in Vancouver.

Yet the future of tea has little to do with new technology or progress, according to Tom Eck, owner of Massachusetts-based Upton Tea Imports. “The tea industry is preserving old world craftsmanship, upholding tradition and the handcrafted nature of

tea,” he says. “There will always be a demand for this.”

Tea & gastronomy

A new brand of specialist is carrying the message of tea to consumers. The tea sommelier is a server who bridges the tea and culinary worlds. There are a handful of hotels and restaurants nationwide with such tea experts. Cynthia Gold, tea sommelier at Swan’s Café at The Boston Park Plaza Hotel, creates recipes and custom tea blends, conducts tea tastings and supports chefs in working with or pairing teas. Pairing tea with food is similar to pairing different dishes with wine: a reliable guideline is matching lighter teas with lighter foods, and stronger teas with more robust foods.

Chocolate pairs well with tea—not only are they both antioxidants, but flavors in both can range from floral and fruity to dark and smoky, and both have astringency from tannins. Experience with a range of teas will help match the right tea with the right chocolate, from white chocolate to the darkest dark, but some popular pairings are Assam, Darjeeling or Oolong with dark chocolate and, with milk chocolate, Yunnan, Dragonwell, Sencha, Darjeeling or Oolong.

Gold likes to pair tea with cheese. “It’s similar to serving cheese with wine except easier because we don’t need to balance acid levels.” She suggests pairing soft or mild creamy cheeses like fresh ricotta, mascarpone or chèvre with green teas like Japanese Sencha or Chinese Dragon Well. A mildly salty cheddar pairs with a slightly sweet and floral Oolong or a more robust, earthier Keemun. For intense, salty cheeses, like Stilton or Gorgonzola, Earl Grey or other flavored, sweet and fruity teas are the best match. (Pair Stilton with the accompanying recipe for tea-infused White Port).

Self-taught, Gold has visited over 20 tea farms throughout Asia, and as a former chef, has cooked extensively with teas. Visiting India this year, she was asked to teach a class on “tea cuisine” to a group of Indian chefs. The course involved matching tea with foods as well as using tea to cure, brine, braise, smoke or poach. Her book, *Culinary Tea*, will be published next year by Running Press/Perseus Books.

Following are recipes from Gold and Numi Tea that attest to tea’s cachet in the kitchen.

Cooking with Tea  
White Port Infused with Black Tea, Rose Petals and Lavender

Cynthia Gold, tea sommelier at Swan’s Café at The Boston Park Plaza Hotel, likes to infuse flavor at room temperature, to preserve the character of the Port and to extract the exact flavor from the tea and petals.

1 bottle of white Port, such as



White Port Infused with Black Tea





Moroccan Mint Couscous

*Dow's Fine White Porto*  
*¼ cup full-bodied black tea leaves*  
*½ cup loosely packed fresh rose petals (or ¼ cup dried rose petals)*  
*2 tablespoons fresh lavender petals (or 1 tablespoon dried lavender petals)*


Place ingredients in glass or stainless steel pitcher. Steep at room temperature to taste for about 45 minutes. The larger leaf tea you use, the longer it will take to infuse. Strain very well using a coffee filter or several layers of cheesecloth. If you leave tea residue, the Port will oversteep. If you leave flower petals, they can break down and turn the clear cocktail cloudy. When properly strained, this Port can stay at room temperature for up to 3 months.

**Moroccan Mint Couscous**  
Couscous is a staple of many cultures in the Middle East and North Africa. This version, courtesy of Numi Tea, offers a subtle mint note to this mildly flavored dish.

*2 tea bags Numi Moroccan Mint*  
*1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil*  
*1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped*  
*1 clove garlic, minced*  
*1 tomato, seeded, finely chopped*  
*2 tablespoon black raisins (preferably organic)*  
*½ cup cooked or canned chickpeas (garbanzo beans)*  
*½ teaspoon ground cinnamon*  
*¼ teaspoon saffron threads*  
*1 teaspoon salt*  
*2 cups cooked couscous*

**A FEW OF THE AUTHOR'S RECOMMENDED TEAS**

- English Breakfast:** Adagio Teas; [adagio.com](http://adagio.com)
- Cucumber Mojo White Tea:** Fully Loaded Tea; [fullyloadedtea.com](http://fullyloadedtea.com)
- Moroccan Mint Puerh:** Numi Tea; [numitea.com](http://numitea.com)
- Fuding Silver Needle Grande Cru 2009:** Rishi Tea; [rishi-tea.com](http://rishi-tea.com)
- Calm:** Tazo Tea; [tazo.com](http://tazo.com)
- Blue Flower Earl Grey:** Upton Tea Imports; [uptontea.com](http://uptontea.com)

Steep two tea bags of Moroccan Mint in ½ cup boiling water for 10 minutes and set aside. Sauté onions and garlic in oil over medium heat until golden. Add tomato, raisins, chickpeas, saffron, cinnamon and salt. Cook five minutes. Add strained tea and simmer another three minutes. Blend mixture with couscous. Serve warm or at room temperature. *Makes four servings.* 

For more tea cocktail recipes, click on [winemag.com/calming](http://winemag.com/calming).