

Journey of Tea

By: Lindsay Kehl

Next to water and coffee, tea is one of the most commonly consumed beverages in the United States. It has been a prominent drink from the beginning of history through today and with the large expansion of cafes it continues to grow in popularity. Although most hot cups of tea carry the basic traits of calorie free clean and comforting, tea also comes in a variety of different tastes and aromas to add to the experience. Its unique characteristics are a result of its slow, simple journey from field to cup. From cultivation through the finishing touches, the product is respected with patients and delicacy every step of the way.

In the Beginning Tea plants, also known as *camellia sinensis*, are planted in tropical and subtropical climates. They mature the best in higher elevations with a decent amount of rainfall. After the seed is planted it takes three long years before it is ready to be harvested. However, the higher the elevation the slower the plants grow which has proven to enhance the flavor of the finished product. Tea leaves, or 'flushes', form at the top of the plant when it is ready to be harvested. In the early morning before the sun becomes a threat, the flushes are hand plucked to minimize the

bruising or damage to the leaves that machines would cause. Each plant will grow a new flush every week to two weeks during the growing season which occurs once in the spring and again in the summer. From the *camellia sinensis* plant white, black, green and oolong teas can be derived.

After the flushes are plucked, the leaves risk immediate fermentation. They will begin to wilt and oxidize unless they are dried or heated immediately. As they oxidize and wilt the chlorophyll breaks down and tannins are released. Heating the plant without drying will halt the oxidation process. The level of oxidation that the leaves endure determines the classification of the tea:

WHITE:

Wilted and un-oxidized

GREEN:

Un-wilted and un-oxidized

OOLONG:

Wilted, bruised and partially oxidized

BLACK:

Wilted, sometimes crushed and fully oxidized

From these classes of teas different blends can be concocted. The



majority of teas sold in the United States are blends. Tea leaves are very impressionable which can make it challenging to protect them from their environment; however it also makes it easier to blend. Blending is the art of enhancing the aroma and taste of the tea by introducing a variety of scents and flavors. Flowers, herbs, citrus oils and spices are some of the many ingredients used to blend the teas into the large variety available today.

Tea is a very simple and complex beverage all in one. Understanding its journey from its slow and steady start to its quick finish adds to the experience of each sip. From basic classification to the added flavors and aromas it is no wonder that it has gained the respect and topped the list as one of the largest consumed drinks in the United States and even the world. Enjoy the clean experience! Your body will thank you.

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