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Q. What is tea and where does it come from ?

A. True tea is made from the fresh leaves and/or buds of the *Camellia sinensis* tea bush. Tea is produced today in over 50 countries of the world, but the most important tea producers are China, India, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan. Herbal teas (or tisanes) are not the same as *Camellia sinensis* tea. These are comprised of flowers, roots, bark, leaves and other parts of many different plants and should always be referred to as herbal tea or tisanes so as not to confuse them with true tea.

Q. Does tea contain caffeine ?

A. Yes, tea naturally contains caffeine, as well as beneficial amino acids and healthful plant antioxidants.

Q: I want to learn about tea: how do I begin ?

A: Start by becoming familiar with all six classes of tea: green, yellow, white, oolong, black, and Pu-erh.

The best way to learn is to taste, taste, taste a variety of teas, keep notes on what classes of tea you like and don't like, and maintain an open mind! Much like exploring premium coffee, wine, beer or cheese, the learning curve for premium tea is infinitely pleasurable. While a dizzying array (thousands !) of teas are made by the tea producing countries, each tea can be grouped into one of **six classes of tea** according to the way the tea was made (method of leaf manufacture.) Each class of tea is unique in style and has a flavor profile that sets it apart from the others.

All tea has a signature flavor, even tea within the same class. There are many reasons why this is so (and happily, the goal of artisan tea making is to ensure that this remains so). For

instance, some of tea's flavor differences are the result of particulars in the natural environment of the tea gardens, such as *soil composition, climate, the sub-variety of tea bushes growing there, and cultivation practices used in the tea gardens.* Of importance, too, are the steps of leaf manufacture utilized inside the tea factory that determine which class of tea a particular batch belongs to. These steps affect flavor too as well as the visual appearance of a tea. Crafting premium tea requires the skills of experienced and dedicated tea workers.

Try a new and delicious tea every time you purchase tea. Steep each once as recommended and sip thoughtfully. Before long, you will be well on your way to becoming a knowledgeable tea enthusiast.

Q: Tell me about these teas.

Green tea: is *fixed but not oxidized* which is why the leaf retains its green color both dried and in the cup. Green teas run the gamut of flavors from light and sweet to vegetal, astringent, stony, and grassy, and display a range of colors from pale, mineral-green, to rich emerald green to deep, forest green. The 'best' green teas are made in the spring from young tender leaf or buds. Leaf tea can be long or short, and straight, slightly curled or twisted, rolled or crimped in appearance. Bud teas are small and slightly plump and often resemble 'bird's beaks'. Premium teas are hand-made tea, and the appearance and condition of the leaf is as important as the flavor. Green tea is the specialty of China, Japan and Korea. The best way to drink green tea is without milk or sugar.

Yellow tea: is *fixed but not oxidized*. Its lush, smooth style comes from a unique 'smothering' process that the fresh leaf undergoes during the manufacturing process. This process can last from a few hours to several days and is determined by the

tea master making the tea. The smothering step gives yellow tea a sweet, buttery flavor that is reminiscent of green tea, but softer in style and less vegetal in taste. Most yellow teas are made from fat, juicy spring plucked tea buds; a few are made from large, leafy basket-fired teas. Yellow tea is made in just a few places in China. Even though yellow tea is included as one of the six classes of tea, it is a rare commodity. The best way to drink yellow tea is without milk or sugar.

White Tea: is *lightly oxidized*, which gives the tea a flavor that is slightly reminiscent of black tea. True, original white tea is *Yin Zhen*, a specialty of Fujian Province, China. This spring plucked, bud-only tea is joined today by two modern-style white teas that incorporate leaf from the same tea bushes along with the buds. Several other countries such as Nepal and India, as well as other provinces in China make white tea, too, but they are not the same as Fujian white teas. Overall, the flavor of true white tea is soft and light, and slightly reminiscent of a light black tea. The best way to drink white tea is without milk or sugar.

Oolong Tea: is *semi-oxidized*, and the range of oxidation is from **25 - 80% oxidation**. This variety is a tea enthusiast's dream. China and Taiwan are famous for *semiball-rolled* and *strip style oolongs* (Taiwan also makes a leafy style). Semiball-rolled oolongs resemble scrunched-up, irregular-shaped pellets of tea, with connecting stem attached. Semiball-rolled oolong teas can be roasted (*traditional style*) or unroasted (*modern style*). Modern-style semiball-rolled oolongs have fresh, green, floral flavors and their colors range from dusty grey-green to emerald green. Traditional style semi-ball rolled oolong teas have deep, rich, flavors, and feature earthy colors like chestnut brown to dark, green-brown. Strip-style oolongs have long, thick, and gently twisted leaves. In China, these teas can be found in a range of hues: black/brown, brown/green to grey/black. Taiwan's strip-style oolong, *Baozhong*, is deep, forest green and possesses loosely twisted, slightly flattened leaves. Leafy Taiwan oolongs such as *Bai Hao* are variegated in brown and tan tones, and the leaf is tipped in white. Oolong teas are refreshing and generally described as lush and floral. Dark, strip style oolongs can be a bit austere in nature; and semiball-rolled green oolongs are fresh, aromatic and intoxicating. Oolong teas are best drunk without milk or sugar.

Black Tea: is **100% fully-oxidized** and is the most popular tea among Western tea drinkers. These teas are historically from China, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka and many are made for adding milk and sugar. Some black teas are straight and short, others are long, and thin with a little twist to the leaf. Some black teas have light brown or golden tip, others have none. The color of the leaf ranges from dark, dusty grey to rich, dark black and may have a mahogany-red tinge. Premium black teas are the 'orthodox' or whole-leaf grades; commercial grade teas and teas manufactured for blending utilize CTC leaf, that which has been cut and torn during manufacture and rolled into tiny pellets. Black teas are flexible, made to be drunk black, with milk and sugar, or with a squeeze of lemon or honey.

Pu-erh: can be *fully oxidized or not oxidized at all, but it is always fermented*. In fact, Pu-erh is China's most famous fermented tea and is made exclusively in the tea mountains of Yunnan Province. It can be sweet and light or strong and toothsome. Two styles are made: *sheng Pu-erh*, the traditional style that is made for aging or for immediate drinking for those looking for a sweet, earthy tea, and *shou Pu-erh*, a modern tea with accelerated, artificial fermentation that is drinkable right away and has a strong, pungent flavor. Pu-erh has a long and fascinating history and was made famous by the tea and horse caravans that brought supplies of tea over the Himalaya into Tibet, Nepal and India. Pu-erh is the daily tea of millions of people in China. **Shou** Pu-erh is served in dim sum restaurants in southern China and Hong Kong.

For more information please refer to our books:

- **The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide**, Ten Speed Press, 2007
- **The Tea Enthusiast's Handbook: A Guide to the World's Best Teas**, Ten Speed Press, 2010

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