

My Experience Brewing Tea

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As an American and a tea lover, I've noticed that there is a widespread misunderstanding of how to brew tea. This has caused, among other things, for Americans to generally consider tea to be a lesser beverage, both in quality and value. Coffee is the American hot beverage of choice.

A Brief Tea Journey

I used to hold that exact view. Tea was a lesser beverage that Chinese restaurants served as a novelty and the British drank to prove that they have poor taste (or perhaps poor taste buds). This was not their fault. Neither the Chinese nor the British gave me a disdain towards tea. My mom did.

My mom was one of those lovely American women that poured hot water into a cup, dropped a bag of tea into it and left it there. I meet people like this all the time. They got hot, usually tepid water in a coffee cup or travel mug with a string and a tea tag dangling out of it.

They have no idea how bad that tea is. And I hope to God they don't think they actually like that bitter, weak, and thin beverage that they think passes for tea.

Fortunately, I know that's not tea, because I know what tea is. I was blessed to serve as a missionary briefly in Zambia, south central Africa, during my college years. The wonderful Zambian people introduced me to real tea brewed in the classic British tradition. I was skeptical at first. After all, how could people cherish that nasty beverage so much? An idiot would say that they obviously had the same bad taste that the British do. I am no such idiot. Anyone who cares for a beverage that well and appreciates it that much obviously knows something that I don't. I had to learn.

A Brewed New World

While staying at a wonderful family's home in Ndola, I requested permission to watch them brew tea. They did not disappoint. I was mesmerized. The boiling of the water, the care of the tea leaves, the pouring of the water, the timing of the steeping, and the addition of quality sweeteners and creams created a lasting imprint to the art of tea brewing. I was hooked on tea.

It would still take a long time for me to understand each aspect of the process and how they affected the target product. Once all that came together in my mind, I realized that I had become

something new: I became a tea snob.

The Reborn Beverage

What the beautiful and peaceful people of Zambia had taught me, I now practice with regularity. I daily make good quality tea for myself, my family, and often my guests. It's considered one of my few hospitable skills (since small talk seems to evade me as an art form). To me, tea has become second only to water in my essential palette. This, of course limits the deep relationships I could have with coffee snobs, but some of the aspects of quality tea translate to effectual coffee brewing as well (and I pay attention to the processes of my coffee snob associates).

Guidelines to Brewing Quality Tea

The following are the basic guidelines that I use in brewing tea both for myself and my loved ones:

1. Begin with quality ingredients
 - **water:** fresh, cold, hard (mineral content), and aerated (oxygen content - usually pretty good with fresh water)
 - **tea leaves:** preferably loose - bagged is ok, but tends to be lower quality. Make sure you know whether it is black, green, white, or herbal
 - **tea kettle:** for prepping the water
 - **cup:** tea or coffee - tea cup is preferred when brewing a pot of tea, but I've learned to brew effectively in a 12 oz coffee cup as well
 - **sweetener of choice:** honey or least-processed-as-possible sugar is best, avoid artificial or alternative sweeteners
 - **cream or milk:** whole milk or cream, flavored cream products are also fine. You'll learn what you prefer with practice
2. Prepare the water according to the type of tea you've selected
 - **black tea:** water should be at a rolling boil. Black tea is the sturdiest of the teas and its flavor is best brought out by fully boiling water
 - **green/herbal tea:** green and herbal teas are softer than black. Boiling water makes them bitter. The water should be around 170 degrees to bring out their lighter and brighter flavor
 - **white tea:** even though white tea is the lightest of the tea family, it steeps best around 170 degrees, just like green/herbal teas
3. Steep the tea
 - This is potentially the most crucial part of the tea brewing. Even good ingredients and well prepared water will fail to make great tea unless it is steeped properly. Conversely, mediocre ingredients can make decent tea if it is steeped optimally.
 - **black tea:** rich flavor starts permeating the tea at 3 minutes for most black teas and bitterness sets in at 5 minutes. Anything within this window is acceptable and the specifics will vary depending on your taste and the exact brand and grade of tea you are brewing. I tend to target just under 4 minutes with most of the black teas I brew.
 - **green/herbal/white tea:** green, herbal and white teas can vary greatly in their optimal

brewing times and the brewer should pay close attention to the instructions when brewing these grades of tea. They generally brew quicker than black teas, but that is only generally true.

4. Present the tea

- These are the finishing touches. If we were making cake, this would be the icing.
- **cup**: select a cup of a size that you will be able to drink in decent time. Tea or coffee cups are common. I find that anything larger tends to get left too long and get cold and stale.
- **milk/creamer**: choose which you prefer (if you use either) AND which complements the type of tea you have made. When in doubt, use less.
- **sweetener**: prefer natural to processed if you can and use less, not more. Allow it to help the tea, not overtake it.

5. Enjoy

And I certainly hope you do. Enjoy tea, it is simply fantastic.

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