

Nov. 26, 2007

## Take Tea and See

LIKE THE AD SAID, IT'S BETTER FOR YOU. BUT HOW?

**Y**ou know the Samurai Shopper as a woman warrior, a fierce foe of the mediocre and precious. But at teatime I turn into a tremulous damsel, calmly afloat on a porcelain cup of malty Assam from Doom Dooma, heading south on the Brahmaputra River. Let the gin-soaked upper crusts dunk their pinkies into puddles of clotted cream; first-flush Assam turns my world impeccably civil and la-di-da.

How vexing, then, that tea has abandoned its clubby ceremonial aspects in exchange for its alleged nutraceutical benefits, which the Chinese, Japanese and Indians have been touting for centuries. Does tea drinking promote miraculous weight loss, shrinking prostates, luminous complexions? Will it cure dropsy or dysentery? The proof is tentative, anecdotal and emotionally Eastern. But all tea — black, green, yellow — is rich in flavonoids and polyphenols, both lauded for their anti-oxidizing and anti-inflammatory properties. And it's progress when a drink long associated with weight loss becomes integral to wellness. But when it becomes a painkiller, carminative or demulcent, the proof depends on how far the pharmaceutical lobby will go to inhibit research.

All tea comes from the leaves of an evergreen plant, *Camellia sinensis*. Green tea is unfermented; yellowish oolong is partially fermented; black tea, the most popular, is fully fermented. White tea is harvested before the buds fully open. Caffeine levels fluctuate. Noncaffeinated herbal infusions like chamomile, yerba mate and the lip-smacking rooibos (a South African bush) do wonders for mind-body synergy. They're tisanes, not teas. Kombucha is popular with the post-grad-school, pre-marriage set. **GT Dave's** kombucha, packed with amino acids and probiotics, is fizzy and sourish, and contains strands of active cultures. The Samurai has tasted all of GT Dave's varieties



If tea is about health, beauty and sociability, it's also an artistic medium. At **P\*ong** restaurant (150 West 10th Street), after-dinner tea is a tour de force. The chef Pichet Ong's recipe includes rubbing orange rind around the teacup rim, placing blood orange marmalade at the cup's bottom and adding **In Pursuit of Tea's** steeped Assam and a shot of **Domaine de Canton's** ginger liqueur. Candied ginger slices sit in the saucer for added bite. "Bitterness is an underrated taste," Ong says at first swallow, but by the penultimate drop, life, and the spiked tempest in the teacup, are just sweet enough. ■

laid-back ska music and Tangy Apricot tea are sweet and dandy. Blackbird's teas come from the **Porto Rico Importing Company**, a treasure trove of loose teas and tisanes. The Shopper favors bold aromatic flavors, and Porto Rico's potpourri-esque Rose Garden and Rooibus Chai fit the bill. Its classic Chinese Keemun (black) and Dragonwell (oolong) are sublime, as distinct

as malbecs and rieslings are in the wine world.

**Adagio Teas** offers more tastes without waste; order samples in mini-tin sizes and start the kettle. Steep green for three minutes, black and oolong for five. Measure precisely; fresh tea makes mass-market bags taste dishwatery.

**Harney & Sons'** Winter White Earl Grey and Moroccan Mint are crazy good; its Spring Season green tea blooms into a calendula flower in your teapot. Kee Ling Tong of **Kee's Chocolates** sells outstanding tea-infused cupcakes — lavender, juniper and green tea, which pair perfectly with Harney's prime blends. The **Nathmulls** Web site extols its brisk organics in passionate tea blurbs; teas from estates like Jungpana and Castleton will ship from Darjeeling to your door.

At the refurbished **Jumeirah Essex House**

at Park South, traditional afternoon tea is a delightful timeout for both workaholics and socialites: pots of Osmanthus Oolong, airy lobby make Old World charm, and World chic. At Jumeirah's spa, detox tea from **Sodashi** and **T's** Jetlag hit the spot and work well, too. If you're in the city, **Sheerin O'kho**, a Parisian-based cafe, its Uptown/Downtown Winter Blend contains green, white and rooibos teas to keep your T-zone happy. For more about health, beauty and sociability, visit **Artistic Medium**. At **P\*ong** restaurant (150 West 10th Street), after-dinner tea is a tour de force. The chef Pichet Ong's recipe includes rubbing orange rind around the teacup rim, placing blood orange marmalade at the bottom and adding **In Pursuit of Tea's** steeped Assam and a shot of **Domaine de Canton's** ginger liqueur. Candied ginger slices sit

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