

For many years, hosts and hostesses have opened their homes to guests for wine tastings. Such intimate gatherings not only provide the basis for a lovely informal fête, they also afford novices and connoisseurs alike the opportunity to cultivate and refine their palates. Why not adopt the same attitudes and practices with tea?

For initiates, the world of tea can intimidate—there are simply so many things to learn, from proper infusion techniques to appreciating the subtle taste differences between varieties. Tea education—like any other sort of learning process—involves time, trial, and error.

One way to hasten the process is to host informal tea tastings with friends. To help you get started, Bruce Richardson, acknowledged tea expert, author, and owner of Benjamin Press, offers his considerable expertise.



In Good Taste

BY BRUCE RICHARDSON

When professional tea tasters work, it is not a pretty sight. It involves a lot of noisy slurping and spitting. These are not activities you want to encourage in a tea room or around a tea table with friends.

I like to present several teas at the conclusion of a dinner. This usually involves a white tea, a green tea, a black tea and an herbal (for guests who prefer to avoid caffeine at night).

I put the dry leaves into cups to pass around. This gives my guests an opportunity to see the tea in its dry state (something every tea buyer wants to see before purchasing). For your own tasting, you should observe the color, size and even the smell of the leaves. I like to tell a short description of each tea. This usually involves the source, production method and any other pedigree notes.

Teas, like wines or whiskies, are generally tasted in a light to dark order. Consider passing along a few brewing notes, such as water temperature and brewing times.

Informal tastings can be enhanced by learning to experience tea through four of the five senses: sight, smell, taste, and touch.

☛ Sight

What does the brewed tea look like? In the manner of observing wines, tilt the cup slightly and observe the color as the light meets the liquid. Darjeelings should be varying shades of reddish brown as the tea deepens toward the center of the cup. Assams should get deep and dark quickly.

Greens and whites will show less color variations but you should observe a clean, not too dark, liquid.

☛ Smell

The most primal of all senses, smell accounts for 90 percent of the sense of taste. Stick your nose deep into the cup and inhale deeply. Compare the aroma to those of everyday foods and items. Are there scents that evoke flowers, fruits, nuts, smoke, wood, spices or herbs?

☛ Taste

Take a tablespoon of tea into the mouth and immediately pull air into the outer sides of your lips while keeping the center of your mouth closed. This causes air to mix with the tea as it moves the liquid throughout the mouth and across the back of the tongue. Hold the tea in your mouth and observe the taste as it changes over a ten-second time period. Pay close attention to the aftertaste.

☛ Touch

Sometimes referred to as “mouth feel,” touch works with sight, smell and taste to unite all your impressions. Is the tea light, medium weighted or full-bodied?

Using these suggestions will allow you to not only broaden your knowledge of tea, but also to demystify the selection process a bit—as well as expand your palate.