

When You Don't Know Beans About Tea

Story and Photographs by Bruce Richardson

We often stumble into events where we receive some affirmation about our purpose in life. Those serendipitous moments often clarify truths we already know, and they can add highlights to our vocations.

One of my tea enlightenment moments happened, not in a Paris tea room or a tea garden in Darjeeling, but in an unlikely New Mexico village. My wife and I were in Abiquiu to tour the home of one of America's foremost artists, Georgia O'Keefe.

Our guide led us through Ms. O'Keefe's living quarters and studio in the simple adobe compound where the painter lived until her death in 1986. As we made our way toward the kitchen, we passed through her pantry. I lingered behind to see what was on the shelves. What were the essentials of Ms. O'Keefe's daily menus?

To my delight, I spied two pint-size jars, each with a simple hand-lettered masking tape label. The one on the left read simply, "Tea." The other jar read, "Good Tea."

I've always felt a special attraction to the works of Georgia O'Keefe. At that moment, our bond became stronger because we shared one of life's great secrets: there is *tea*, and there is *good tea*! The current tea renaissance in America is based on the latter.

I field numerous phone calls these days from coffee retailers who have just discovered that the demand for good tea is on the rise in America. They are anxious for a quick entry into sales of this mysterious beverage. After all, you simply brew it with hot water and drink it out of a cup. How difficult can that be?

I immediately place the callers into one of two camps. Either (1) they are willing to admit they don't know everything there is to know about the world of tea and are open to enlightenment, or (2) they know all they want to know and just want to ascertain the bottom line. "How much does it cost per serving and what's my profit margin?"

My background is in education. I firmly believe that education cannot begin until the student realizes he/she doesn't know all there is to know about a particular subject. I also know that none of us are ever experts in the world of tea. We are all students of the ancient beverage.



With tea enlightenment our goal, let's look at my top eight tips for adding tea to a retail coffee business:

1. Know your product. I've always said "For me, tea is not a commodity; it's a lifestyle." I drink tea morning, noon and night. I read about tea, talk about tea and sometimes dream about tea. It infuses every portion of my life. I realize that not everyone wants to fall in love with this beverage, but if you are going to sell it, you should at least drink it from time to time so you can talk intelligently with your staff and customers.

What basic facts do you need to know about tea to sell it intelligently? Ensure that you and your sales staff know the tea families and simple characteristics of the teas you sell. Be able to give brewing instructions. Print out a tea inventory sheet with a simple one sentence description for each of your teas. Educate your staff well enough that they can answer, "Is this Tippy Assam stronger than your First Flush Darjeeling?" or "Why do they call this White Tea?" or "Do you have a green tea that I will enjoy?"

2. Develop relationships with tea suppliers. You have a choice when it comes to choosing stock teas. You can use one tea supplier exclusively or you can select teas from various wholesalers. The proliferation of tea suppliers over the past ten years may seem overwhelming to the tea novice. It's important to find a blender who works well with your situation. Talk to several suppliers to find a company that gives personalized service and expertise when setting up an initial inventory.

The Cultured Cup in Dallas, Texas, began as a coffee retailer before making a major commitment to tea eight years ago. Phil Krampetz and Kyle Stewart decided to add the line of *Mariage Freres* French teas to their store. Located in an affluent north Dallas neighborhood, the store serves a well-traveled clientele who have developed a taste for quality coffees and teas. Nearly 50 large tins holding an array of bulk teas now line half the store's shelves. Customers buy loose teas by the pound or quarter pound. Approximately 95% of the tea sold is *Mariage Freres*, making The Cultured Cup one of the largest American retailers of bulk French teas.



3. Determine your selling method. One of the first choices you need to make in marketing teas is whether you will measure bulk to sell by the ounce or if you will offer pre-packaged tea. Obviously, it takes more time to stop and hand-measure loose tea, but if you are already doing this with coffee, it should come easily for your staff. There is a higher perceived value in hand-measured teas. I notice that a premium price is generally expected for hand-measured gourmet teas.

Most often, bulk teas are sold from tins rather than glass jars. Although the jars allow the beauty of the blend to be seen, they do not protect the tea leaves from the harmful effects of light.

Pre-packaged teas take up less display space, involve less labor and are convenient for most customers. The down side is that they don't allow the interaction you have with your customer as you open the tins, show them the tea leaves and breathe in the unique aromas of the tea.

New retailers often ask whether they should sell only loose teas or only teabags. In most cases, a combination of the two will attract more customers. You might consider offering packaged teabags even if your main line is going to be hand-measured loose tea.

4. Know how to brew tea properly. Brewing temperatures and times are very important for making great tea. Your customers need to know that they can't use the same water temperature for both Lung Ching and English Breakfast. Produce a bookmark for the convenience of your customers. Put water temperature recommendations for each tea family on one side. Put your store information on the opposite side.

Be sure your staff can answer simple brewing questions without hesitating. Generally, the blacker the tea, the hotter the water; the greener the tea, the less heat is needed.

It's important to warn your coffee drinking customers not to make tea in utensils that have held coffee. It's impossible to get coffee oils out of a carafe or pot that has contained coffee.

5. Know your customer base. I have seen American tea tastes change dramatically in the past 15 years. I began a tea business in 1990 offering a half-dozen teas – mostly flavored. Norwood Pratt and I often refer to this as the “Boone's Farm era” of tea. We added peach, apricot or wild cherry flavorings to black tea to entice new customers. This worked well, especially in my native south, to introduce hot tea to a new generation of tea drinkers. Now most of the customers who began with me are no longer drinking flavored teas. They're drinking second flush Darjeelings, single estate Ceylons, or white teas.

Do buying habits differ from region to region? Yes, but this is changing as more and more tea retailers market to a national audience. Regional preferences are no longer as strong in larger urban markets. Atlanta-based Teavana has 22 stores across the country – all stocking the same 110 teas. Tea retailers in smaller markets may need to fine tune their stock to the palates of their clientele.

6. Educate your customers. I've made it a habit to ask my overseas tea colleagues one common question over the past year: “Is there anywhere in the world where tea is growing in popularity more than the United States?” The answer is always “no.” Tea growers in Sri Lanka, India and Kenya all want to know how they can better supply the blossoming American tea trade. London tea author Jane Pettigrew finds the American

market “exciting and innovative,” while Marcus Wulf of HTH Hamburger Teehandel sees American tastes evolving to a “more sophisticated palate.”

Today’s tea drinkers thirst for knowledge about their favorite beverage. They look for magazines, books and other written materials to satisfy their cravings for information. They are voracious readers. You can take advantage of that craving by stocking at least one of the several tea magazines aimed at consumers. There is additional profit to be made by carrying an assortment of “how to” tea books or some of the many general books about tea.

7. Stock accessories for success. Tea drinkers don’t just buy tea. They need teapots and all the other paraphernalia that goes with the custom of tea drinking. You will shortchange your bottom line if you don’t stock a line of infusers, teacups and kettles for your customers.

8. Continue your tea education. I cringe when I think how little I knew when I started in the tea business. Fortunately for me, the love of tea in America was just being rekindled when I started selling tea and there was not a lot of general tea knowledge floating around. I decided early on to make tea a lifelong study.

Today, it’s much easier to find seminars, professional organizations, journals and reference books to keep us up-to-date about current tea trends and products. Groups like STI or SCAA have given us the tools we need to stay at the head of the class when it comes to being tea savvy.

Most of all, success comes from paying attention. The best tea seller will be the retailer who has a passion for tea, knows the state of the industry, and watches for new trends and blends that are emerging in the marketplace. And who, above all, stays alert for moments of enlightenment.



This article first appeared in *Fresh Cup* magazine, April 2005. Bruce Richardson is a regular columnist for *Fresh Cup*.

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