

THE ANTI-COFFEE

Tea: the other hot drink

BY LYNN FREEHILL

When you think about getting high, tea isn't the first substance that comes to mind. But tea tripping—that warm, giggly feeling you experience after a few too many cups—is a real phenomenon, according to Rusty Bishop, owner of Gong Fu Tea in Des Moines' East Village.

No longer a drink sipped from a fine china teacup on grandmother's doily, tea is making its way along the West Coast and into the Midwest.

Bishop and his business partner, Mike Feller, opened their Asian-inspired teahouse, with its mint-colored walls and Zen-like atmosphere, in June 2004. Tea is trendy now, not only with women, but increasingly with men. "In New York and San Francisco, tea houses are popping up like coffeehouses were 10 years ago," Bishop says. "It's a relaxing, calming thing—life's so stressful, and you need time to sit back and reflect."

Although tea is "in," Bishop adds the concoction originated in China 5,000 years ago.

Know It

Wine comes from grapes, coffee comes from beans, and tea comes from leaves. All tea originates from the same plant—the wondrous *cameillia sinesis* plant, which is primarily grown in China, Sri Lanka, India and Kenya.

Tea leaves were once plucked from plants by trained monkeys. Now, professional pickers and machines do the work. The leaves begin oxidizing the moment they're removed, just the way an apple begins oxidizing and browning as soon as you take a bite. The length of time that the leaves are allowed to oxidize determines what type of tea results, from heavily oxidized black to briefly oxidized green.

The oxidation time also dictates how much caffeine is consumed per cup. All tea contains caffeine, but when the leaves oxidate only briefly, they release their caffeine in water more slowly. For that reason, some types of teas make comforting bedtime beverages, while others are better midday pick-me-ups.

Teas don't grow in convenient fruity, floral and spicy flavors, of course. Those essences are added by blending the leaves with oils in cement-mixer-like machines. Every country where tea is sipped—and that's practically everywhere—has its own variations. So take your stuck-in-the-States self on a little trip with Moroccan Mint, Té Pakistsani, Shanghai Sunrise, German Breakfast, Kenyan Safari, Mediterranean Chamomile, Le Tour de France or Tibetan Tiger.

Choose It

Black teas, the old standbys in Europe and the United States, make the heaviest brews, with darker colors and the most caffeine. Since they feel the most substantial in the mouth, they make good eye-openers or coffee replacements. The most familiar flavors to Americans are usually black tea varieties, including chai, pekoe and English breakfast.

Come mid-afternoon, sippers searching for a lighter drink can brew green tea, which is Japan's most popular type and commonly considered the most beneficial to the body. Green teas can taste watery to the uninitiated, so you may want to sample some with fruit essences before plunging into the plain kinds.

Then there are oolongs. You'll want to get intimate with blacks and greens before you try these—they're the most subtle, sophisticated tea variety. That's because they're full-bodied and natural, with no added flavors. And since their leaves must be hand rolled, they're usually the priciest. If you want to splurge, though, you can justify your expense knowing that the leaves can be re-used five to seven times.

Brew It

Sure, you've tossed a teabag into a microwaved mug of water and called it done. But bagged tea is actually the lowest-grade tea because it's made from the dust, or fannings, of the leaves. You can easily graduate to a classier level by buying loose-leaf tea. Unconstrained by bags, these tea leaves have room to open up for a purer, fuller flavor.

Whipping up a cup of loose-leaf tea may seem more complicated than using a bag, but with basic, inexpensive equipment, it doesn't have to be. A quality mug with a built-in strainer is about \$10. But first-timers may want to try flip filters, which resemble rectangular coffee filters into which you sprinkle loose-leaf tea and hang from the side of your cup. A pack of 100 sets you back about \$4.

Whichever you choose, steep your tea for five minutes. Boiling water is best for black tea, but such hot temperatures will hurt delicate green tea leaves, creating a bitter aftertaste. Instead, warm water to about 175 degrees.

And finally, be sure to serve tea properly. Purists frown on additives, but who doesn't love a sweet, creamy chai? So go on—dump sugar and milk into your black teas without shame. Just remember green teas are best sweetened with honey, and they don't take milk. Oolongs shouldn't be touched. Black and fruit teas are the best options when making iced tea, but steer clear of green teas since their flavors are so subtle that diluting them with ice makes them almost tasteless.

Be Hip on It

Once you've mastered the basics, it's time for the lowdown on the trendiest teas out there. Leave Earl Grey behind and sample edgier, more ethnic varieties.

Yerba Maté (pronounced YER-buh mah-TAY) is the hands-down favorite beverage in Argentina. It has an herbal flavor and a caffeine-like stimulant called mateine. Teens and twentysomethings make it part of their party routine, and its hipness is enhanced by the fact that it's sipped using a gourd-like ceramic cup and bombilla straw, which has a strainer in the bottom.

And we can't ignore the hottest trend in tea today: bubble teas, or milkshake-like concoctions brought to us from Taiwan. Shrewd tea peddlers wanted to make tea more appealing to kids, so they added tapioca pearls, and later, other exotic extras like red and green jellies, flan and almonds. A thick straw helps you slurp the chewy bits. Who cares if tea snobs look down their noses at you? This is the fun stuff, as Bishop says. He plans to start selling bubble tea in his shop soon. "It's the equivalent of a cappuccino or a mocha in the coffee world," he says. "It's an experience in itself."

Feel Good About It

Healthy properties, like disease-fighting flavonoids, along with tea's exotic flavors and soothing powers, make drinking tea worthwhile. Consider the Japanese, who drink tea like water, have the longest life expectancy in the world—not to mention that Okinawa has the highest number of centenarians per capita—and you'll get an inkling of why tea's health benefits are so touted.

Here's a short list of other ways tea helps your body:

Antioxidants can help ward off cancer, and green tea's got 'em in spades.

Some research indicates that black teas aid the cardiovascular system, reducing chances of a heart attack.

Tea drinking is a calorie-free way to keep hydrated.

Gong Fu Tea

414 East Sixth Street

(515) 288-3388

Hours: Monday–Saturday

7 a.m.–6 p.m.

Pick up a 12-oz. or 20-oz. cup of hot tea for less than \$3, or get an in-store pot that runs \$3.25 per person. If you feel overwhelmed by the expansive selection, you might want to try Ancient Happiness, Gong Fu's best-selling tea, which is a Japanese green variety mixed with rose and cornflower petals.

To fully experience Gong Fu's ambiance, be sure to make your way to the secluded back room, furnished with low, square walnut tables on a raised, padded floor. Sip and relax beside the gurgling brook in the corner, or for more people-watching opportunities, grab a chair by the window at the front of the shop.