

Chinese Tea Explained



What color tea would you like?

Tea has been known in China for thousands of years. Earliest records go back to the Shang Dynasty where tea leaves, steeped in hot water, was drunk for medicinal purposes. Since then, the drinking of tea is now enjoyed worldwide as a healthy, energizing and relaxing beverage. All true teas are made from the same plant, *Camellia sinensis*, which is native to East Asia. This differs from “herbal teas” which is made from any variety of organic plant parts (ie. Hibiscus tea is made from Hibiscus flowers).

Today, you can find hundreds of different varieties of tea. Commonly you will see tea categorized by color: white, green, or black. What determines the “color” is based on which part of the plant is used and how it is processed.

White tea uses the youngest tea buds and leaves which are picked before they are fully open and are covered with white hairs. The highest quality of white tea

uses only the buds. After harvesting, the tea is dried using direct sunlight in a process called “withering”. Once the moisture is removed from the bud/leaves, the tea is then packaged and readied for sale. Because white tea is minimally processed, the tea contains a large amount of polyphenols which are antioxidant plant compounds. Studies have shown that antioxidants have many health benefits. And compared to green tea, white tea has less caffeine. This type of tea tends to offer sweet floral flavor and brews into a pale yellow color.

Green tea uses just the green tea leaves which are harvested and sun-dried for up to 18 hours. The tea is then roasted through a pan-firing process giving it a more earthy, grassy taste. Compared to black tea, green tea has higher levels of polyphenols giving it more antioxidant properties. Green tea also contains less caffeine than black tea. *It is interesting to note that the popular Japanese matcha green tea pulverizes the tea leaves into a powder. This process gives it a higher concentration of antioxidants and caffeine. Caffeine is known to improve attention, reaction time and alertness when taken in low and moderate amounts.*

Black tea is processed by having the tea leaves bruised or gently grounded during drying. This process allows the leaves to oxidize and turn the leaves to a deep brown or black color. The result is a full-bodied tea that has earthy or woody notes. The tea is rich and strong with flavor similar to coffee. Between white, green and black, black tea has the highest concentration of caffeine. But important to note that *all* teas have less caffeine than coffee.

Here are some of the best Chinese tea by color:

White:

Bai Hao Yin Zhen (Silver Needles)

Bai Mu Dan (White Peony)

Shou Mei (Long Life Eyebrow)

Gong Mei (Tribute Eyebrow – a high quality tea once given as a tribute to the Imperial Court)

Green:

Gunpowder (each leaf rolled into a small pellet)

Long Jing (Dragon Well)

Jasmine Pearl (green tea rolled with jasmine flowers)

Anji Bai Cha (although translate to Anji White Tea, it is a green tea with leaves that look silvery)

Black:

Keemun (from the Qimen County of Anhui Province)

Dian Hong (Yunnan Black)

Lapsang Souchong (Pine wood large leaf)

Jin Jun Mei (Golden Eyebrow)