

The Origins Of The Tea Plant

Where does tea come from?

Her name is *Camellia Sinensis* and although her name may not be instantly recognizable to all, she is one of the most known and valued species of plant in the world. Some may know her for her medicinal properties. There are claims that, when taken in certain doses, she has the capacity to treat and positively impact a broad range of ailments, including sore throat, asthma, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.

Even more may know her by her taste—when properly processed and prepared, she has a pleasant, cleansing, subtly astringent flavor that can be served both hot and cold. But surely all will know her by her familiar nickname: the tea plant, an oddly short name for a plant so versatile and diverse in purpose.

White tea, green tea, black tea, oolong, and puer tea (also known as bolay tea) are all harvested from *Camellia Sinensis*—that, while originally native to Asia (*Sinensis* is the Latin translation of the word “China”), is now cultivated throughout the world in tropical, subtropical, and even marine climates.

Tea Species: A Chip Off The Old Branch

What are the different species of tea plant?

Contrary to popular belief, general misconception, and all-around confusion, there is only one species of tea plant. And although *Camellia Sinensis* has been thrilling palates for years in many different flavors, including both white tea and green tea, she is unequivocally in a class (and species) of her own. There are, however, different branches of the *Camellia Sinensis* family. The two most dominant, from which all tea is produced, are known as *Sinensis* and *Assamica*.

Sinensis is an evergreen plant native to mainland South Asia. Its physical attributes manifest themselves in a shrub or small tree that can grow to heights of 10 feet. The flowers she produces are small, yellowish white, with about seven or eight petals.

Assamica, which is named for the region in India where it's grown and harvested, yields larger leaves and can grow up to 50 feet in height.

It should be noted that most herbal teas contain no amount of *Sinensis* or *Assamica*, and by definition are comprised of any variety of flowers (fresh or dried), leaves, seeds, and roots. There are exceptions: the twig tea known as *Kukicha* is an herbal beverage that is comprised of the twigs and stems of the tea plant.

Like Water For Tea: Tea Plant Growing Preferences

What are the growing preferences of the tea plant?

Although *Camellia Sinensis* is an adaptable plant, able to be cultivated in climates as diverse as tropical, subtropical, and marine, she can also be a picky bugger when it comes to getting enough to drink. A minimum of 50 inches of rainfall per year are required to adequately quench her thirst and ensure proper growth. The plant's ideal environment is similar to that found in the foothills of the Himalayas, where cool temperatures converge with frequent rain to provide fertile growing grounds.

A minimum temperature of 10 degrees Fahrenheit is needed to ensure the plant growth and development of *Sinensis*, which can withstand frosty conditions but can suffer die-off if conditions become too unfavorable. Its sibling plant *Assamica* thrives in more tropical surroundings. Here, its growth cycle performs best when the soil is loamy and the humidity high, in average temperatures of 85 degrees Fahrenheit, where rainfall can be as high as 100 inches per year. Most Assam teas grow at sea level, or just above, not exceeding 150–200 feet above.

Terroir And Tea

What is the terroir of tea?

Mysteries abound when it comes to trying to put a finger on just how tea produced from the same plant can vary so dramatically in quality and flavor from one region to another. The same plant grown in a similar environment and harvested in the exact same manner in India, for example, will produce a distinctly different tasting tea than that grown in China. The fact that the Darjeeling region produces some of the finest, most sought after black tea, but has yet to produce a green or oolong tea of matching quality, only serves to deepen the mystery.

Ultimately, the difference boils down to three things: location, location, and a French word that has no equivalent in the English language, *terroir*. The loose translation of *terroir* is “a sense of place,” or “placeness,” and is a word that's used to explain how the characteristics of a product's environment, and other intangible factors, can affect its outcome. *Terroir* was a term first used in reference to the vastly different outcomes encountered in the production of wine and coffee, but is now also used in reference to the tea cycle.

The High Grade Yields Of China Soil

What are some of the high grade teas produced in China?

The fertile soil of China has yielded hundreds of flavors and varieties of tea. The most prolific provinces in China are known for producing high standard, signature teas that owe as much to their production standards as the ground from which they spring forth.

Grown in the prosperous region of Fujian, Tie Guan Yin, known as the “Iron Goddess of Mercy,” is a highly sought-after oolong tea that resembles green tea in many respects. The harvesting schedule for Tie Guan Yin, which is harvested five times a year, dictates its flavor. The highest quality crop is harvested during the spring first flush, after the tea plant has awakened from its fall-induced hibernation—a period of rest and recovery from which the plant emerges rich in freshness.

Puer tea, often referred to as Bolay tea, hails from the province of Yunnan and is one of few crossover teas that contains qualities of both green tea and black tea. Puer tea leaves taken from wild *Camellia Sinensis* trees are the most valuable, offering darker tones and a natural hint of mint that’s attributed to camphor trees that often grow nearby.

The Hearty Tea Shrub

What is the life span of the tea bush?

On plain sight, *Camellia Sinensis* is little more than an overgrown shrub—a small tree whose potential height of a mere 10 feet is dwarfed by its longevity and versatility. Capable of achieving a lifespan in excess of 100 years, *Camellia Sinensis* is one of nature's most reliable and prolific resources.

Young tea plants require a period of at least five years before they're capable of producing a quality crop. Their maturity period is signaled by the plant's production of tea leaves. A ripe tea leaf will evidence itself by the presence of two leaves and a bud. Tea leaves grow from the stems of the plant's stalks; when young, they bear silky white hairs that disappear when the leaf matures.

Slightly larger on the height scale but lacking substantial longevity, wild growth *Camellia Assamica* has been known to reach heights of 60 feet and survive 50 years. *Assamica* leaves are slightly longer than *Camellia Sinensis* leaves, extending up to 14 inches.

Both *Sinensis* and *Assamica* are proof that leaves slower in development achieve a finer flavor than those quick to bud. For this reason, each tea season's first flush harvest leaves are the most sought after.

White Tea: The Black Sheep Of The Tea Family

What are the health benefits of white tea?

White tea is certainly nowhere near as popular as its siblings, green, black, and oolong. In fact, even its second-cousin herbal tea, which isn’t really considered proper tea at all, is more readily found. So what gives?

Connoisseurs adore white tea for its sweet simplicity, lightness and exclusivity. Beyond this, there is evidence to indicate that the subtle taste of white tea is an acquired one.

White tea is harvested from the same *Camellia Sinensis* plant from which other teas are harvested; however, the leaves are picked before they've fully blossomed. The fine white hair covering the buds gives white tea its name. Produced mostly in the province of Fujian in China and on a limited scale in the Darjeeling region of India, white tea is uncured and not oxidized, and mostly contains buds and young tea leaves. The caffeine content of white teas are higher than those of other teas, and its medicinal properties are reportedly greater than those of green tea.

Japan's Sencha

What is the most popular type of tea in Japan?

In Japan, green tea is the universal beverage. Its popularity is unrivaled, and its significance in Japanese culture is so deeply engrained that it's often simply referred to as "tea," despite the fact that not all Japanese tea is green tea. Of all tea produced in Japan, nearly 80 percent is Sencha, a green tea strong in flavor and long in tradition.

Sencha's first harvest, or first flush, is called Shincha, or "new tea." The harvest begins in the month of April immediately following the spring thaw, having gone through a cycle of growth during the fall and winter months. The plant's low exposure to sunlight during this period of growth translates to a tea that is sharp in taste, with an invigorating spark of freshness.

The types of Sencha made are dependent on the region in which they're cultivated and processed. The regions of Shizuoka and Fukuoka produce "needle leaf" Sencha, named so for its shape. Likewise, the "comma-shaped" leaf is named for its appearance, and is processed in the Kyushu region, among others.

The Forgotten Teas: Yellow And Red

What is yellow tea?

Rounding out the color spectrum of available teas are yellow tea and red tea.

A word to the wise: red tea, although sometimes marketed alongside green, white, and yellow, is not made from *Camellia Sinensis* leaves, but rather from the *Apalathus Linearis* plant of South Africa—also known as roobios, or "red bush." In fact, it's not even tea, but a tisane, an herbal tea that contains no caffeine and also boasts a list of alleged health benefits, including lowered hypertension, nervous tension, irritability and instances of insomnia.

An actual product of *Camellia Sinensis*, yellow tea is known for its antioxidant content and many apparent medicinal values. Gradually closing the popularity gap between itself and the frontrunner green tea, yellow tea is slowly becoming the preference of a number of tea drinkers who desire the health benefits of green tea without its grassy flavor. Yellow tea originates from the same tea plant that produces green tea, however the leaves are picked earlier and fermented for a longer period of time, resulting in a taste similar to a white tea brew.

Did You Know? Odds, Ends And Interesting Facts

What is the exact location of the tea plant's origin?

Scattered throughout the annals of tea's long and storied history, interesting factoids shed light on the cultural, economic and historical impact of *Camellia Sinensis*.

- Due to the affinity that some Chinese Emperors had for revisionist history—in particular, their ability to take credit for popular cultural practices—the exact location of the tea plant's origin is still unknown.
- Tea bricks, compacted blocks of whole or finely ground tea, were used throughout history as a form of currency in China, Tibet and Mongolia. As late as World War II, Siberians still used tea bricks as a form of tender. These tea bricks, which also doubled as food, were scored and easily broke into smaller pieces to make change.
- In the Brahmaputra valley between the Assam valley and the Himalayas, discoveries indicate the ancient people cultivated tea plants long ago. Judging by the ancient roads and gardens overgrown by the elements and time, these early inhabitants, of which much is still a mystery, may have been the first tea farmers.