

White Tea - Infused With Healthy Appeal

By Bruce Richardson

Ask for "white tea" in an English-style tea room and you will receive a strong cup of English Breakfast with a hearty addition of milk. That "white tea" is what the British drink from a very young age, but it is not the tea that currently is causing so much interest. The history of the true tea family known as "white" began hundreds of years before the British tasted tea. The newest trend in tea is an ancient beverage that has been around for over a thousand years.

White tea is the most alluring, yet enigmatic of the four tea families (black, green, oolong, and white). Every tea drinker in the western world knows black teas, and more and more are sampling green teas. Occasionally they even taste oolongs. But whites are a tea of different color, and their new popularity is turning heads in the worlds of food, health, and cosmetics.

Some consumers are still puzzled as to whether they should drink white tea, apply it to their faces, or meditate over it. Actually - all three uses are acceptable!

White tea has been revered in Chinese culture at least since the 12th century. It was singled out as the rarest and finest tea produced during the time of Emperor Hui Tsung (1101-1125). He was so preoccupied with his love of tea and the pursuit of the perfect cup, that he lost his empire to the invading Mongols.

According to Stephen Chao of Eastrise Trading Corporation, "White tea is named for tea buds covered with silvery white down or fine hairs. In traditional processing, this tea undergoes only withering and drying, with no pan-firing or rolling. The tea leaves are strewn over bamboo trays indoors and a fan is used to control the flow of air over the leaves. This drying process takes place over several days. In China, white tea is produced mainly in northern Fujian Province."

The two most particular characteristics of white tea are bud-count and the process the tea goes through as it makes its way from the bush to the cup. White teas are often picked when the buds are tightly enveloped by new leaves. These leaves maintain the silky white hairs that denote new growth.

One of the most famous white teas is Junshan Yinzhen or Silver Needles. Junshan is the name of the mountain where it originates, and Yinzhen translates as silver needles. This is the most identifiable white tea because the tea looks like silver needles. These tight, unopened buds of the *camellia sinensis* bush are carefully picked and dried with as little handling as possible to avoid bruising.

There is little oxidation and less tannins. The liquor is so pale that it almost appears white. It has a fresh flavor with a passing sweetness to the long-lasting finish. It takes over 3000 buds and a lot of hand labor to make a pound of silver needles. Almost as valuable as gold, it is produced only a few days each year and fetches top dollar when it is sold by the ounce or gram.

Other well-known Chinese white teas include White Peony (Pai Mu Tan), made from the very small buds and leaves that are plucked in early spring just before they open, and Jade Ring (Yu Huan), hand-sculpted into tiny ringlets that spring to life when infused in hot water.

China is no longer the sole producer of white tea. India 's famed Darjeeling region has begun producing small amounts of white tea that is finding its way into the American market. Floating loose in a clear glass tea pot, the re-hydrated tea becomes a work of art as it unfurls to reveal its true form and release its golden nectar.

The driving force behind white tea's new fame may be the health benefits. The white elixir has joined green tea as a possible preventive for many of life's ailments, from certain cancers to skin wrinkles. Green tea has undergone about 10 years of research showing that it may prevent cancer, lower blood cholesterol, control high blood pressure, and even prevent cavities and fight viruses. In recent years, white tea has been included in research, most notably at the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State University. In the Institute study, white tea is staving off cancer of the colon, even more than green tea, in animal studies.

These restorative benefits have not missed cosmetic industry's eye. In 2002, white tea began appearing in cosmetic products, joining a growing infusion of green tea lotions and bath products already on store shelves.

White teas are best-enjoyed either alone or after a light meal. Closest to the fresh taste of pure tea leaves, their delicate flavor will be lost on a tongue saturated with spicy foods or heavy sauces. For those who find green teas too earthy or vegetative, the clean taste of white tea is the perfect way to enjoy the health benefits of tea.

Water temperature is one of the most important factors in preparing white tea. The delicate buds are best brewed with water ranging from 160-170 degrees F. Generally these teas need a long brew - up to six minutes for the first infusion. Add a minute or two to each subsequent steep. A fine-quality silver needles tea will yield four to seven infusions with each having a unique flavor palate - making it well worth the cost.

Caffeine content? Yes, there is significant caffeine in white teas, especially the bud-only ones. Caffeine seems to concentrate in the bud and it releases slowly. A second infusion may contain

more caffeine than the first infusion because it takes the buds more time to re-hydrate and release their caffeine into the water.

Most tea blenders suggest that you either let the tea leaves float loose in the pot or purchase a simple Chinese gaiwan. This three-piece porcelain set includes a handle-less cup, a small saucer, and lid. It is the perfect vessel to reverently prepare these beautiful teas.

Simply place a healthy pinch of dried tea into the cup and gently add the heated water. Remove the lid while the tea infuses. The tea will warm your hands as you cradle it and the aroma will tease your nostrils. Your heart will beat more slowly and calm thoughts will enter your mind. You may start to realize how Emperor Hui Tsung forgot about the everyday concerns of his kingdom. Then replace the lid, allowing it to hold back the leaves as you drink from the cup. Add more hot water and continue the process as long as you wish.

If you want a pick-me-up in the morning, you should drink a strong black tea. But if you are feeling stress in your life and long to maintain a quiet balance, you might want to ease into the rest of the day with a gentle cup of white tea. Whatever your motivation, you'll nourish both your physical and spiritual well-being.

Source: <http://elmwoodinn.com/about/whitetea.html>