



tea_{for you}

The humble cuppa has come
a long way in recent years,
Melinda Williams explores
the explosion in New Zealand's
love for tea.

A cup of tea used to be so simple. Ask for tea at a café or a friend's house and you knew just what to expect – a reddish-brown brew that came via a bag or a couple of scoops of leaves in the pot. Add a splash of milk and maybe a cube of sugar, and you had a drink that everyone knew and loved.

These days, a visit to the tea section of your local supermarket is enough to induce the kind of consumer choice-paralysis previously reserved for the cereal aisle. Box upon box of tea from dozens of brands offer myriad temptations: traditional 'gumboot' black tea, green tea, white tea, Earl Grey, rooibos, oolong, zingy berry combinations, teas to soothe and de-stress you, teas for digestion, teas claiming to perk you up, teas for breakfast, afternoon, after dinner and before bed. If you dare venture into a specialty tea shop, of which New Zealand now has a number, the variety becomes even more bewildering: loose-leaf blends, organic combinations, smoky Lapsang Souchongs, spicy chais, delicate jasmine and green tea pearls that unwind sinuously in the cup, and colourful mixes of leaves and flowerbuds. It's enough to make you feel like a cup of tea and a lie down.

New Zealanders are determined tea drinkers. As early as the 1870s, we were sipping our way through 3.1 kilograms of dried *Camellia sinensis* leaves per capita every year – almost twice as much as our counterparts in England. Today, the figures have reversed (we now consume around 1.3 kilograms each per year, while the British drink around three kilograms) but the tea market in New Zealand through supermarkets alone is still worth over \$62 million a year.

The last decade has seen a rapid change in our tea drinking habits. When Dilmah Tea first entered the New Zealand market 18 years ago, Kiwis were steadfast in their preference for traditional ‘gumboot’ tea, says national manager Nigel Scott. Today, although black tea is still by far our preference, green tea and herbal and fruit infusions are becoming much more popular. “In dollar terms, the black tea market is about \$45 million worth of sales through supermarkets, compared to green tea which is \$6.5 million – but green tea has had rapid growth over the last six or seven years,” Nigel explains. “It has slowed down in the last couple of years, to about five per cent growth, but it was up at 35-40 per cent. Herbal and fruit infusions have a market of around \$11 million.”

At the Bell Tea and Coffee Company in east Auckland, Master Tea Taster Matt Greenwood agrees Kiwis are becoming more adventurous in their

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tea-drinking. “Tea really lagged behind coffee five years ago in terms of what was available, how it was presented, and sometimes the quality as well,” he says. “But now people are keeping four, five, six different teas in their cupboard or drawer to drink at different times of the day.”

The charmingly enthusiastic Englishman is intimately familiar with the tea-drinking habits of New Zealanders. At Bell, Matt’s job is to source and purchase the various types of tea used in each of Bell’s blends, taste and grade the product on arrival, produce the unique combinations of teas and flavourings that make up each of the products in the Bell Tea and Twinings ranges, and ensure consistency of flavour throughout. And if the tea isn’t consistent, he’ll hear about it. “One of the great things about Twinings drinkers I’ve found in New Zealand is that they are very vocal, especially Earl Grey drinkers,” he says. “We probably get more feedback from Twinings Earl Grey drinkers than anyone else. They are very, very passionate and protective of the product. That’s the one that when I’m tasting, I’m thinking, ‘If this is not right, people are going to be writing letters.’”

Matt travels frequently to tea estates around the world to source product. “For Bell, we have a whole family of teas and a lot of effort goes into finding and sourcing them,” he says. “We’re members of the Ethical Tea Partnership, which is a non-profit organisation, and they have a database of tea estates. We source from that list. There are probably 2000-3000 tea estates that we would potentially source from, in around 20 different countries.”

In New Zealand, virtually all tea is imported from the main growing centres of Sri Lanka, China and India, though some varieties come from Europe and Japan. Although New Zealand offers good growing conditions for tea, the cost of setting up a farm is very high, and there is currently only one substantial tea growing operation in the country – a million-plant farm in Gordonton, Waikato, that grows oolong tea for export. Even New Zealand’s own boutique tea brands import the vast majority of tea leaves and other ingredients for their blends.

Wellingtonians John and Amanda Van Gorp set up their boutique brand, t Leaf T, almost five years ago, just as New Zealand’s tea market was really starting to diversify. John had sold his part in the Burger Wisconsin chain and was looking for a new business project when his wife noticed a renewed enthusiasm for tea among café goers. After investigation, they decided there was a gap in the market for contemporary boutique brands that could supply high quality teas. Now they sell a wide range of teas and tea-related products from their store on Manners St in Wellington.

Matt Greenwood



Photo by Mark Heaslip





Photo by Nicola Edmonds

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John says he is particularly interested in developing blends that are unique to New Zealand, and has introduced several products that use local ingredients. His New Zealand Breakfast tea mixes Assam tea from India with manuka flavours, Fabulous Feijoa combines green tea with rose and feijoa, and the Kawakawa Fire blends lemongrass and ginger with piquant kawakawa. “In the world of tea, we want to start asserting New Zealand influences,” he explains. “We really want to create a company with New Zealand uniqueness so that we can then export that to the world.” He says he is encouraged to hear reports of the oolong tea plantation in the Waikato. “It’s quite exciting. If they can produce tea for export, then there’s no reason that someone couldn’t develop other New Zealand-grown teas at a price point that New Zealand consumers can afford.”

Michelle Casson is another tea lover who made a dramatic career

change to follow her passion. A lifetime fan of tea – “I come from a family where tea was an integral part of family life” – at the age of 40 she ditched her career as an accountant to train as a tea expert and set up Tea Global in Central Otago. Michelle’s description of why she loves tea sums up the main reason for the public’s growing interest: its diversity. “Whenever people ask me what I love about tea, it’s a very easy question to answer,” she enthuses. “I love everything. It engages all our senses – the visual, the story, the smell, the taste. I love the feeling of intimacy it evokes. And the lovely thing about tea is that you can select one to drink to suit any mood throughout the day.” Michelle’s Stir Tea range covers everything from basic black breakfast teas and classical green teas like Dragonwell and Precious Eyebrow, to charming herbal blends like Chamomint and seasonal releases such as the new Spring Harvest.

She credits tea’s increasing appeal to widespread publicity around its high antioxidant levels. “One of the significant drivers is the health benefits, and they are enormous. Those properties have always been there in tea, but people are now very aware of what they are putting into their bodies.”

Matt Greenwood agrees: “I think there is a growing recognition that tea is good for you. I always believed that, and there was always research to back it up, particularly for green tea. More and more studies are showing that tea really is a superfood.”

Green tea and specialty blends represent the biggest growth markets for tea, and the areas of focus for most brands. Matt says there has been strong interest in their Twinings Green Tea with Orange and Mandarin since it was introduced. “New Zealand was only the second country in the world to take it and that was a real coup for us.” Another success story is their Lady Grey blend, with New Zealand leading the world in consumption per capita of the blend of black tea, bergamot oil, cornflower and citrus peel.

Bell is also about to release a brand new blend in New Zealand, India Origin. “Two of the greatest teas in the world are Darjeeling, which is what we call the Champagne of tea, and Assam, which is actually the largest tea-growing region in the world,” Matt explains. “When I first started as a tea taster, one of my jobs was to blend tea for the Queen. We used to fly in chests of Darjeeling and Assam tea and blend them together and drop them round the back door of Buckingham Palace for her garden parties and personal use. I always loved that blend, and that was what the tea tasters used to drink in the afternoon. So we’ve tried to recreate that blend and bring a totally different tea to the New Zealand market.”

Nigel Scott says over the next few years he expects to see the art and ritual of creating a fine cup of tea continue to improve, at home and in restaurants and cafés, just as coffee has done. “We’re seeing that it’s no longer acceptable for a café to offer a ‘pot of tea’ on their menu. They need a breakfast tea, an Earl Grey, a green tea, maybe a couple of herbal teas.”

Pouring a cuppa these days is certainly not the predictable experience it once was, and it seems we’re all the better for it. ●

The Tea Guy Diaries.

DARJEELING/ASSAM

MARCH 2007 I don't know why India's two finest teas are not often blended together - here in India anyway. It's true they have different characters, but the result is just fantastic. A big variety tea that even impressed our boss. I've talked to my friends here, they say they wish the idea would catch on.

I'll have to send them some!



APRIL 2008 Actually it's no work in the past, blending these two teas. Have to get the precise balance. We've looked at twelve different blends this week - still more work to do I think.

*Big, Soft, Spiced, Lively
- the drink of all sorts*



A blend of two GREAT TEAS - the heart of India's tea growing tradition

OCTOBER 2008

It's all about the freshness, and today we took delivery of some fantastic fresh Darjeeling, and that's transformed everything. Love it.



Fantastic tea varieties, just what it's all about. It's just Darjeeling!

JANUARY 2009

It's important to us - all our Assam tea estates are actively participating in the Ethical Tea Partnership and are part of the independent monitoring programme. Darjeeling is the next region to be included in the ETP initiative so timing is just for us.

For success we have the right source and the right balance. This tea is going to show a few people why - New Zealand has never been offered a blend like this before.

Bell

India Origin Tea

80 tea bags

