

TEA BUYER'S GUIDE

Originally, tea was a beverage made from the *camellia sinensis* plant, a subtropical evergreen plant. "Tea" today is often used generically like the brand names Kleenex and Band-Aids. The focus of this Buyer's Guide is on *camellia sinensis*... what we conveniently refer to as white, green, oolong, and black teas. Use this guide to determine the qualities you like in a tea.

Grading The Leaf

Four ways to scrutinize any tea are 1) sight, 2) nose, 3) taste, and 4) nobility. Use your senses to inspect the tea when it's dry and after it's been brewed.

Seeing Is Believing

Visually inspect the dry leaf before brewing for uniform size and color. A premium tea should obviously be all leaf of uniform size and color, no stems or debris. The presence of flower tip and stylish leaf curl are added value and hallmarks of certain teas. There is a common scale used to grade leaf size. "Grade" in this sense only indicates leaf size, not cup quality.

LEAF GRADES (Large to Small)	
OP	Orange Pekoe
Pekoe	Shorter Than OP
Souchong	Large, mature leaf common among Chinese teas
BOP	Broken orange pekoe
BP	Shorter than BOP
Fannings	Teabag cut

DUST	
T	Tippy
F	Flowery
S	Silver Tips
G	Golden Tips
Example:	TGFOP - tippy golden flowery orange pekoe

Brew the tea and look at the color of the liquor. Premium tea should have a clear infusion with a "halo effect" around the edges of the cup where the liquor's surface touches the cup. Go back and inspect the wet leaf to see if it is consistent with what you observed in its dry state. There should not be any surprises.

The Nose Knows

Aroma, the "nose" of a tea, plays an important part role in our enjoyment of it. It's said 80% of taste comes through the nose. Smell the tea's aroma. But for an even more reveal sniff, nose the wet, infused leaves in the brewing vessel.

A Matter Of Taste

Primary taste profiles are sweet, salty, sour, bitter and smoky. Tea should not be sour unless it has been flavored or blended with a sour component like lemon or verbana. Sour in a straight tea is possibly due to contamination or under-finishing at the processing level.

Slurp the tea taking in lots of oxygen. Mist your entire mouth with tea making sure to spray all sides of the tongue and back of the mouth. Properly brew the tea adhering to prescribed water temperature and steeping time. This gives you an experiential benchmark to use for future reference.

Nobility - Art or Commodity

Tea is a commodity because generic names and standards are used to grade and evaluate it. Tea is also art because, like wine and cooking, creativity and flair can add value. The price of tea as a commodity is based on supply and demand. The price of tea as art is based on a master's touch.

3 Points of Nobility:

1. History and culture of the garden - standards of excellence.
2. Cultivation and the environment - soil and climatic conditions.
3. Processing - the master's touch

Summary

Having a working sense of tea gives you a foundation from which to explore its limitless offerings. The best way to learn more about tea is to take risks and try new teas. Find a reputable and knowledgeable tea purveyor whom you trust and ask questions about the leaves you buy.