

FOOD & DRINK



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Join the tea party

The traditional British brew is evolving. Forget soggy tea bags: it's all about exotic fruits, healthy herbal infusions and delicious food pairings at the country's most imaginative restaurants, says *Sue Quinn*

It's Sunday afternoon in the new Comins Tea House in Bath, but unlike traditional British tea shops there's not a knitted cosy or tea-bag in sight. "This tea has a big umami flavour that will stand up against the gyoza," Rob Comins explains, as he pours water heated to 80C into a tiny Japanese teapot, then sets a timer for one minute. He's right. We sip the sencha fukamushi, a deep steamed Japanese green tea, between bites of salty pork-filled dumpling; the savoury notes of both sing together perfectly.

Rob and his wife Michelle are among the new breed of café owners who take tea very seriously. We're not talking builder's brew with milk and sugar here, but fine single estate loose-leaf teas served in authentic teaware, carefully paired with dumplings, open sandwiches and cakes, according to their flavour profile. "The range of flavours possible from tea can be used to create a complementary base for food, or a contrast to emphasise flavours," explains Rob, a self-confessed tea geek. "The variety is limitless."

Speciality tea-houses like Comins are now popping up around the UK, proof that the British cuppa is changing. Our thirst for traditional tea has been cooling for years; sales have tumbled by more than 20 per cent since 2010, according to consumer research group Mintel. But our love for loose-leaf, herbal and fruit teas, especially among consumers aged 25-34, is "going from strength to strength".

Surprisingly, this new love affair with tea is linked to the booming popularity of specialist coffee, according to Bethan Thomas, a product manager with fine tea specialist Whittard of Chelsea. "The growth of independent coffee shops has really interested people in the different origins and flavours of coffee," she says. "Now the same thing is happening to tea."

The perceived healthiness of certain teas is also playing a part in the trend. "The real growth is in fruit and herbal teas, for those who want to reduce their caffeine intake, and green tea, because of the high antioxidant levels," says Bethan. "Also, we're becoming more adventurous. Traditional teas like Earl Grey or English Breakfast will always have a place in our hearts, but people are interested in unique tea flavours these days."

In fact, some popular teas are barely recognisable from the leaves that first landed in the UK from China in the 1650s – anyone for a maple bacon pancake brew? There's also kombucha, a fermented, slightly effervescent black or green tea drink, which is gaining popularity among the health-food brigade for its supposed gut benefits. And bubble tea – a Taiwanese tea-based drink containing chewy tapioca balls or

'Tea adds an extra layer to food: it lifts the flavours'



Hot stuff: clockwise from top, rosebud, chrysanthemum, rhubarb, mint, green, bubble, strawberry and black tea. Left: a quail egg dish paired with tea at The Modern Pantry

'Leave overnight for the flavours to infuse'

Asparagus with sencha oil and matcha salt

Serves 4

For the sencha oil
500ml flavourless oil, such as vegetable or sunflower
25g sencha tea leaves

For the matcha salt
1 cup sea salt flakes
2 tsp matcha tea

For the asparagus
500g asparagus

Cover and leave overnight, then strain through a fine sieve and keep in the fridge until needed.

• To make the matcha salt, combine the salt and matcha in a bowl until the flakes are evenly covered and nice and green. Leave overnight for the flavours to infuse.

• Slice the asparagus lengthwise, removing the tough ends. Spread out on a baking tray cut-side up and drizzle lightly with the sencha oil. Grill gently for 3-4 minutes until just brown at the edges. Arrange on a serving plate, drizzle with more sencha oil and scatter with the matcha salt.

• To make the sencha oil, pour the oil into a small saucepan and add the sencha. Warm gently over a low heat and take off just as the first tiny bubbles begin to appear (do not boil).

By Kyle Whittington of The Tea Studio

fruit jellies – has also been boiling away merrily for a few years.

Most importantly, we're no longer just sipping tea as an afternoon thirst-quencher; more and more we're pairing it carefully – and rather spectacularly – with food. The Modern Pantry in London's Finsbury Square matches different brews from upmarket tea company Lalani, served in porcelain "infusion ware" with a six-course afternoon tea menu. Divine lemon scones, gooseberry jam and clotted cream can be washed down with Winter Qing Xin Oolong 2014 from Taiwan. Adam Handling, the innovative young chef at London's Caxton Grill, embraces tea in more decadent ways. He incorporates lychee kombucha in the Liquid Gold course on his 11-course tasting menu, serving it in a vial alongside a bite of olive oil butter encased in white chocolate, wrapped in 24 carat gold leaf and topped with caviar and truffle.

Tea has long been poured into cooking. Earl Grey, for example, is lovely for rehydrating dried fruit, and matcha, a ground green tea, now gives a verdant glow to everything from smoothies to muffins. But increasingly, tea is being used innovatively, as a seasoning. Frenchie restaurant in Covent Garden has won praise for its divine ricotta tortelli served in a lapsang souchong broth. And Melissa Thompson, from Japanese comfort food pop-up Fowl Mouths, will serve panna cotta with cherry-flavoured sencha tea at The Lido Café in Heme Hill, south London. Snaps and Rye in west London serves a delicious chocolate pudding with Earl Grey and rhubarb.

Kyle Whittington, of London's Tea Studio, runs events including tea-and-cheese tastings, brewing classes, and supper clubs where tea is used in every course. Guests might tuck into prawns with green tea mayonnaise; Pu-erh tea and mushroom risotto; pulled pork cooked in Ceylon tea; and baked cheesecake with oolong syrup. "One of the things that tea does in food is add an extra layer of flavour," Whittington says. "Sometimes you don't necessarily taste the tea, it just enhances and lifts the flavours of the dish."

Back at Comins Tea House, Rob Comins urges tea lovers to use quality leaves, and to try it black. He says the addition of milk and sugar is a hangover from centuries ago, when black tea was low grade and bitter, often bulked out with other leaves or even sheep dung. "Habits are hard to shift," he says. "But a larger leaf – bigger than the dust in most tea-bags – means tea won't overbrew and create bitterness. The leaves will also have a natural sweetness." Does he ever resort to using tea bags? For a moment he looks at me as if I've lost the plot. "No," he says with a laugh.

MARIELA HANITON/VALE THE BERRY