

100 Years of Tea Bags

This year, 2008, is the 100th anniversary of the invention of the teabag, one of the key events in the history of tea. That tea is now the second most popular beverage in the world (water is first of course) is due in large part to the teabag.

Often dismissed by tea lovers as the worst thing to happen to tea, tea bags are being reinvented by premium tea companies to provide a new and exciting taste experience. Two of these new premium teabags are being launched in Hong Kong by H-TEA-O Tea Garden.

An Accidental Invention

At the turn of the 20th century, tea was much more expensive than today, highly prized by those that could afford it. In New York, each new cargo from India and China was eagerly awaited by tea traders and their customers, much as the latest wine vintages are snapped up today. When the latest tea shipment arrived in port, the tea traders would send samples of the new tea to their customers, using small metal tins to hold the tea. Legend has it that one of these tea importers, Thomas Sullivan, became annoyed at the high cost of the tin boxes. So in 1908 he switched to small hand-sown silk bags. Some of his customers just dropped the bag into hot water and found it brewed a very acceptable cup of tea. Realising how convenient a simple disposable bag could be, his customers started requesting the tea in this packaging, much to Mr Sullivan's surprise.

Thomas Sullivan, as well as others, realized its potential and began experimenting with other types of materials including cheese cloth, gauze, cellophane and punched paper. Unfortunately for Mr. Sullivan, he failed to take out a patent on his invention, although others did. Little is known of what happened to Mr. Sullivan or his company which is a shame given the significance of his accidental invention.

Tea Bags – the best and worst thing to happen to tea

Many tea lovers consider the teabag one of the worst inventions of the 20th century. But this is unfair on the teabag - the problem is the quality of the tea hidden in the bag not the use of teabags.

After Thomas Sullivan's accidental invention, the early teabags contained full-leaf premium tea and they brewed a cup as good as any you could get from loose tea in a pot. What was even better was that the tea bag provides convenience and brewing control. Convenience because a removable device means that tea can be made as easily in a mug as in a pot, without the need for a tea strainer. Brewing control because, for tea to taste its best, the leaves ought to be removed from the hot water at the end of a specific brewing period, and this is easy with a bag.

But most modern teabags contain lower quality tea crushed to a dust to aid fast infusion. As teabags became more popular, the big tea companies realised that if they used tea leaves that have been crushed to a fine dust, they only needed to put half as much tea in the bag, so making more money. Unfortunately crushed tea (CTC tea) may brew quickly but it lacks much of the subtle flavour of full leaf tea.

Even so, it is the convenience of the teabag that has made black tea in particular so popular today. With up to 95% of tea sold in the UK coming from teabags, many people have only experienced teabag tea and have no idea what a full flavour tea can taste like.

Time for a Change

What is surprising is that the design of the teabag has evolved very little over the last 100 years. The concept of a sealed disposable bag prefilled with tea, with a string and a decorative tag was patented back in 1916 and yet this is almost identical to what we all buy in supermarkets today.

Tea bags became commonly available in the States during the 20s. Americans, well known for their love of labour-saving devices, took to the teabag straight-away and it was soon the most popular form of packaging for retail tea. The British, being rather more stuck with their traditions, didn't start to use teabags until 1953 when Tetley launched the first UK teabag. Now 95% of tea sold in the UK is in teabags.

Over the years various changes in shape were pioneered by the major tea companies such as round teabags (Tetley, 1992) and pyramid bags (Brooke Bond, 1996) but these changes were mainly marketing gimmicks as the tea in the bags was of the same poor quality. But they did bring about some of the more memorable adverts on TV with the famous PG Tips chimpanzees, the Tetley Tea Folk and "You only get an "ooh!" with Typhoo"

Quality Tea Bags are Coming Back

There is a new educated consumer in the market who is demanding a higher quality premium product, often with ethical requirements attached such as organic/bio-dynamic/fair-trade. They want this premium product presented in the best way, so that they can fully appreciate the added flavour, but still retaining the convenience of the teabag.

Addressing this discerning consumer, two products have been launched in the last few years that show how good premium tea bags can really be with stunning designs and premium quality full-leaf tea. These products are being launched in Hong Kong by H-TEA-O Tea Garden in Causeway Bay.

Tea Forté



The Tea Forté tea infuser (it is so much more than a bag) is work of art that makes the tea bag a thing of beauty. Founded in 2003, Tea Forté is the realization of one man's dream and vision. Renowned American designer, Peter Hewitt, set out to capture the "art of tea" and define the contemporary ceremony of tea. With a rigid gauze pyramid bag and a signature tea leaf handle, there is nothing quite like the Tea Forté infuser. Coupled with stylish accessories designed around the infuser, Tea Forté has transformed the humble tea bag into 5-star tea experience.



H-TEA-O Tea Garden in Causeway Bay are introducing the full range of Tea Forté teas and tea accessories, much to the excitement of those tea lovers that have come across Tea Forté in other parts of the world.

More details and images can be found at www.teaforte.hk

Ticolino Tea Stick - Create a Stir



If you wanted to design out all the things that are wrong with a teabag but keep the convenience, you might well end up with the Ticolino tea stick. A Ticolino is a foil tube that looks smart and stylish, a design that doesn't drip when you remove the infuser, and gives the full flavour of the tea by using BOP leaves, that's the benefit of a tea stick. Developed in the States by Serengeti Tea Company, the Ticolino is available in convenient packs for use at home or in the office.

H-TEA-O Tea Garden in Causeway Bay are introducing the full range of Ticolino Tea Infusers.

Who Is Drinking Tea, Isn't It All About Coffee Now?

Exciting new forms of packaging, fresh natural flavours and stylish tea outlets have all changed the image of tea in the eyes of the public. Now many young consumers are turning to tea as the new healthy and hip hot drink. Coupled with the new image, hardly a day goes by without some new study that shows drinking tea can help reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease and colds, can help in weight reduction and can improve skin complexion.

Even hardened coffee drinkers are turning their back on their java addiction in favour of healthier brews such as Tea Latte, Gingerbread Rooibos and single estate Darjeeling.

So it is hardly surprising that tea is now one of the fastest growing F&B market segments in the States and is also a growing phenomenon here in Asia, the birth place of tea. Is it a coincidence that Starbucks are closing 600 of their shops?

Further Information About H-TEA-O

Location

H-TEA-O Tea Garden

Unit F-9, First Floor, Fashion Walk, 19 Great George Street, Causeway Bay
(MTR Exit E)

Tel: 2972 2111

Hours: 12 noon to 10pm every day

H-TEA-O has now been operating in Hong Kong for over three and a half years and is the leading tea outlet for modern premium teas in Hong Kong.

With over 70 premium teas and herbal drinks, H-TEA-O provides the broadest range of tea based beverages anywhere in Hong Kong, all served in a relaxing lounge environment. Alongside traditional favourites such as Earl Grey and Dragonwell, H-TEA-O are one of the few suppliers of unique teas such as Rooibos and Honeybush. Signature teas include Tony's Tea Latte, Moroccan Mint Chocolate and Iced Green Tea Mojito.

Award winning chefs, authentic clotted cream imported from Cornwall and nutritious healthy meal sets all make for a wonderful experience that can be enjoyed by all the family.

Websites:

H-TEA-O Tea Salons www.h-tea-o.com

Tea Forté www.teaforte.hk

Tea Concepts www.tea-concepts.com

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