



TEA TIME REVIVAL

Today's creative take on tea is giving the centuries old beverage new life

By Carolyn Green

Just utter the word “tea,” and dozens of images come to mind. There’s one in which a group of matronly ladies are enjoying camaraderie and a cuppa served in bone china teacups. And there’s traditional British “high tea” served in an upscale hotel where guests munch on delicate watercress sandwiches, and freshly baked scones with strawberries and clotted cream as they sip their cup of tea. Or picture a frenetic Chinese restaurant where Oolong tea reigns supreme.

Tea is a staple that’s been around for about 5,000 years. According to legend, Chinese Emperor Shen Nung discovered the soothing beverage quite accidentally when a tea leaf fell into a bowl of hot water he was drinking. Today, tea is more popular than ever, and in recent years it has found its way into an increasing number of households. According to Louise Roberge, president of the Toronto-based Tea Association of Canada, figures obtained from ACNielsen’s MarketTrack National All Channels banner show retail tea sales for the 52-week period ending Jan. 20 were \$319.1 million, up five per cent from a year earlier.



“There are many reasons why consumption is increasing,” says Roberge, who notes that the sale of tea to the foodservice sector would be an additional 10 per cent-plus. “One is definitely the tea and health message. Tea is all-natural and people are looking for natural with no additives. As well, it has no calories but it has antioxidants.”

While baby boomers in search of eternal youth – or at least ways to prevent the inevitable aging process – are clearly a powerful demographic segment spurring growth in consumption, Roberge and others say that tea has found its way into the hearts and stomachs of younger Canadians. “Many of their buddies at college are from Asian cultures and they drink tea,” says Roberge. “So they’re sharing that with younger Canadians. As well, they always want to do something different from their parents. Their parents are drinking coffee, and so they’re drinking tea.”

Ron Sadler, managing director for Toronto-based Twinings of Canada, sees another emerging market for tea – Canada’s male population. Although tea has historically been more popular with women, Sadler credits Tim Hortons for making tea acceptable to men through a massive advertising campaign for Steeped Tea. The 2004 multi-media blitz came hand in hand with the company’s introduction of its new tea-brewing technique of making tea using loose tea leaves in what it calls a third-generation tea master machine. Coffee giant Starbucks has contributed to male acceptance as well. “Ten years ago, it wasn’t okay for men to eat quiche. Well, it wasn’t okay for guys to drink tea,” says Sadler. “Now it’s okay to go to Starbucks and while your friends are having their double mocha cappa-frappachino latte or whatever, you can have a cup of tea.”

Clearly, though, one of the biggest trends driving tea sales is the deluge of specialty teas that have bombarded the market in recent years. Topping that list is green tea, which according to ACNielsen figures saw year-over-year sales growth of 19 per cent for the 52-week period ending July 7 to \$31.8 million, and a 14-per-cent gain during the same period in 2006.

Roberge and others attribute green tea’s meteoric rise to a number of factors. In addition to proven health benefits that have received considerable media attention, green tea has been on supermarket shelves for several years. “Tetley introduced green tea in Canada over 10 years ago,” says Kathy Grant-Munoz, marketing consultant for Toronto-based Tetley Canada Inc. “However, in the last five years, we have introduced more green tea flavours to meet consumer demand for new and innovative flavour combinations. Green tea may be more familiar to consumers than specialty black teas or herbal teas, as green tea is a staple in

countries like China and Japan. As well, there has been tremendous media attention on the health benefits of green tea in terms of antioxidants.”

Robert MacLeod, vice-president of Sales and Marketing for Sussex, N.B.-based G.E. Barbour Inc., believes that in addition to the health benefits, green tea’s popularity has exploded because a cornucopia of new flavours has been developed. And, he says, “It’s a lifestyle thing. People are working more so when they’re relaxing, they really want to relax and enjoy a nice beverage to make it special.”

While not as buoyant, herbal specialty tea sales increased by one per cent in July. Although figures are not available, experts say that organic tea is also making small inroads. Noting that Tetley introduced it to the Canadian market three years ago, Grant-Munoz says organic tea currently only represents about 3.5 per cent of the total tea category, but has demonstrated double-digit growth and should continue to experience gains. MacLeod agrees: “I think it’s a major thing and it’s here to stay. If you’ve got Loblaw’s and Wal-Mart [selling it], it’s not a [flash-in-the-pan] trend. As the price spread between organic and non-organic is reduced, sales will go up.”

While tea preferences have changed in recent years, so too has packaging. Roberge notes that more manufacturers are using round containers and bolder, eye-catching package designs to differentiate brands on the grocery store shelf. About three years ago Tetley introduced a tea canister to make the product easier to store, and, says Grant-Munoz, to keep the tea fresh longer. And while a few companies like Barbour’s continue to use real gauze tea bags, others such as Lipton’s have moved to a pyramid shape for loose tea. Experts say this technique results in a better-infused beverage. On package information is also evolving. Twinings, for example, has added more information on its packages, such as the tea’s origin, the taste profile and “a strength meter” indicating the differing strengths of tea varieties.

In addition to proven health benefits and a much broader group of tea drinkers who are constantly looking for new choices in tea, a recent decision by Health Canada’s Natural Health Products Directorate to allow three health claims on tea packages – that all types of tea infusions are recognized as a source of antioxidants; that tea increases awareness; and that tea helps to maintain cardiovascular health – will undoubtedly continue to drive tea consumption and sales. “These sorts of statements are just going to be huge as far as furthering consumers’ perception that tea is a good thing,” says Sadler. MacLeod agrees: “It’s probably one of the most exciting categories in the food business today because of the recent discoveries of the health benefits. As they become more widely known, I think the category is going to grow, and I think that we’ll grow as well.” FC



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