

bag, bottle or box?

By Carey Rossi



NEW TEA PRODUCTS MAKE ANYTIME TEA TIME. HERE'S HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST.

Teas aren't just leaves anymore. Walk through markets today and you'll realize that tea has taken on many forms—bagged, bottled or boxed. And we are buying it—lots of it—\$5.55 billion worth in 2004 to be exact, according to the Tea Association of the USA. While loose-leaf varieties remain the purest way to enjoy tea, buying them and other convenient tea forms aren't as easy as reading the tea leaves.

The first important tea-buying strategy is: Always look for the certified organic seal—whether the tea's loose, bagged, bottled or boxed. "Organic means you are getting a cleaner tea," says Seth Goldman, President and Tea-EO of Honest Tea. "Tea is one of the few foods that undergo no rinsing as an agricultural product. For instance, when you buy an apple and you want to get the chemicals off it, you can wash it off. But if you use tea leaves, the first time any chemicals on them are rinsed off is when hot water is poured over them. So organic is the way to make sure your tea is not undergoing any chemical processing," says Goldman.

The second step is choosing between...

loose leaf and tea bags

"Loose-leaf tea has history, ritual and tradition," says Barbara Graves, Minister of Commerce of The Republic of

Tea. The purest way to enjoy tea, it is also one of the best ways to get its antioxidant benefits. Still, putting a tea bag in a cup of hot water, letting it steep and then discarding it is much easier than the tradition of brewing tea leaves in water and straining. "Tea bags offer a more convenient way to experience large [tea leaves] that are more common with loose tea," says Ted Wentzel, Director of Marketing for Oregon Chai. Otherwise, there are many similarities between the two.

what to look for:

- **leaf size** Look for a uniformity of size—whole pieces, not broken bits or dust. "This shows the tea has been handled properly, and is the highest grade," says Graves. When tea leaves are cut large, there is far less damage to the cellular structure of the tea, so you get more of the flavor and benefits from it.

- **powder (or more important, a lack of it)** When you process and transport tea, there is a certain amount of breakdown, which presents itself as powder or dust. "You want a minimum amount of these fractured cells," says TJ McIntyre of Pixie Maté. "So I would say: Powder equals bad."

- **air-tight container** All fine teas should be sold in a tight, light-proof containers to ensure quality, freshness and

longevity. "If it's a loose leaf tea, you want to make sure that the container is air-tight," says Goldman. "If tea bags aren't individually sealed, more flavor and potency is released."

- **tea bag** Choose bags made with dioxin-free paper. Dioxin is a chemical that makes paper white but is not needed. But who cares what color the tea bag is when it's steeping? Some companies have switched to more of a mesh bag, which they believe allows the water to better surround the tea and extract more of its flavor and benefits.

bottled tea: the ultimate in convenience

Today's bottled teas aren't your fall-into-the-pool, sugary and tea-flavored refreshments of yesteryear. There's real tea in those bottles. While the popularity of bottled teas is growing—again, thank convenience—it isn't because they are a tea-flavored soft drink. "In some ways, teas are taking over the role that sodas used to play," says Seth Goldman of Honest Tea. "People are realizing that, number one, sodas have a lot of sugar; and number two, they don't possess any health properties. So people say, "I can get some refreshment and get some antioxidants by drinking tea—that's a better choice." And more companies are making an authentic tea product so it tastes better and it has more antioxidant

properties. Research out of Rutgers University has found that bottled tea made with real tea leaves has the same antioxidant levels as brewed tea. So how do you know if you are getting an authentic bottled tea?

what to look for:

- **organic** Wentzel believes organic certification is as important with bottled brews as it is with tea leaves.

"It is difficult to truly know the quality of the tea unless it is organic."

- **100-percent fresh-brewed** A good bottled tea will say this on its label, says Brett Holmes, partner of Toddy, a Texas-based beverage-development company. Bottled tea is brewed from concentrated tea—which shouldn't be confused with tea concentrate. "Tea concentrate is a bad phrase," says Holmes, and it's indicated by label ingredients like tea solids, tea from concentrate and tea extracts. "Those are all hints that this isn't real tea," Goldman says.

- **sugar** A lot of what is sold as teas these days is high-fructose corn syrup with tea flavoring. "Sweetener comes first because it is heavier than the tea leaves by weight," says Goldman. With that in mind, look for a drink that has fewer calories because it means that there is less sugar. You may think that tea is healthier than soda, but if a bottle has, for instance, 120 calories it is no healthier than soda.



boxed tea: concentrated benefits

If you stroll down the tea aisle of your favorite store, you may notice a new kind of box on those shelves—large squares or aseptic packs filled with liquid concentrated teas. “Concentrated teas are different from tea concentrate,” says Holmes. They are 100-percent fresh-brewed tea. Concentrated teas are packed with antioxidants and remain that way since light isn’t able to penetrate the packaging to break them down; the shelf life is a year or more. To make concentrated tea, says Holmes, “We might put 10 or 20 tea bags in a half-gallon of water—it makes for a very strong tea. Without properly diluting it, it would be too strong to drink.”

When buying concentrated, apply the bottled tea watch list with these additions:

what to look for:

- **100-percent fresh-brewed** What gets put into the box (or aseptic pack) should be 100-percent fresh-brewed

tea. Then dilute according to the instructions—for instance, mix one part to five parts water. “But what you are mixing with that water isn’t instant tea; it’s 100-percent fresh-brewed tea,” says Holmes. “The concentrate is just very, very strong.”

- **packaging** Look for aseptic packaging since this process will lock in the flavor and nutrients of the tea. And don’t worry about shelf stability because that is the whole point of aseptic packaging. “An aseptic product most mirrors a fresh one,” says Holmes.

- **no artificial preservatives** Concentrated teas do not need artificial preservatives. The packaging and aseptic process helps keep the tea fresh. Good tea will incorporate natural preservatives like lemon juice or natural ascorbic acid. Watch out for potassium sorbate or sodium benzoate—these are the most commonly used artificial preservatives.

And, now anytime can truly be an authentic and health-beneficial tea time. □