

Tea Trend

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SEATTLE (AP) -- Millions of Americans still reach for that first cup of coffee to get them going in the morning, but tea is making inroads into the java market.

National tea sales have climbed from just over \$1 billion to about \$5.1 billion over the last decade, according to the Tea Council of the USA, a trade group. And it's not just traditional black and orange pekoe tea behind that growth -- more people are buying green and specialty teas.

Tea's rising popularity has encouraged entrepreneurs to open tea shops around the country, even in rural communities such as Newton, N.J.; Carefree, Ariz.; and Anoka, Minn., where people sit for a while and enjoy a pot or a cup. And even in coffee-loving Seattle.

"Tea is for fun," said Susan Zuege, co-owner of the Perennial Tea Room, located in Post Alley, near this city's famous Pike Place Market and the original Starbucks coffee shop. "You should enjoy it. If you don't, you might as well do coffee."

Lipton is by far the best-selling brand of tea in the country with more than 50 percent of the market, and also leads the bottled and canned tea industry with 33.4 percent of sales, according to 2002 figures from Beverage Marketing Corp. in New York.

Mike Spillane, owner of G.S. Haley Company Inc., a tea wholesaler in Redwood City, Calif., said specialty teas are also growing in popularity.

Baby boomers, looking to move away from traditional coffee drinks, have likely helped feed into the tea frenzy, Spillane said. And the emergence of bottled, ready to drink teas have brought tea to younger people who normally view it as a drink for older the generation, he said.

"It has legitimatized the word 'tea' to the youth," Spillane.

Most Americans use tea bags, although loose tea is making strides among the specialty tea sector, said Joseph Simrany, president of the New York-based Tea Council. "It's convenience that's winning out over flavor delivery. Americans still love their convenience," he said.

Tea bag sales nationwide have increased by about 6 percent in the last five years, according to recent numbers from Information Resources Inc., a Chicago-based market research firm.

Meanwhile, tea shops have sprung up throughout the United States and currently number about 1,200.

In Woodbury, Conn., Mrs. White's Tea Room has been catering to its regulars' affluent tastes for almost five years, owner Tom Winters said. He bought the shop from a friend about a year ago and said he was "surprised how many people drink tea."

Just as Winters has broadened his knowledge of the product, so too have his customers, who are about 95 percent women.

"They're more in tune to more than just a plain Earl Grey," he said. "They're trying the Chinese Lychee ... and more people are trying the green teas, seeking the benefits."

Health is perhaps one of the biggest driving forces behind tea's acclaim.

Green tea is best known for its health benefits, primarily because some of the first studies on tea's health attributes came out of Japan and China, where that particular type is widely consumed, said Dr. Jeffrey Blumberg, professor of nutrition at Tufts University in Boston.

All tea, however, comes from the same camellia sinensis plant, with how the leaves are

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processed determining the different types of tea.

"Black tea has similar properties but has not gotten as much attention," Blumberg said.

A recent study by researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and Harvard medical School showed that tea, unlike coffee, boosts the body's immune system to fight infection. It also showed blood cells from tea drinkers responded five times faster to germs than did those of coffee drinkers.

A study published last year by the American Heart Association journal Circulation showed that people who drank large amounts of tea -- about 19 cups a week -- also were less likely to die after a heart attack.

Tea boasts a range of benefits, including health and flavor, that culminate to provide people with a relaxing experience, said Cindi Bigelow, vice president of R.C. Bigelow Tea.

Connecticut-based Bigelow Tea was started in 1945 when the company launched its Constant Comment brand. The company now offers dozens of flavored teas and sells honey, gift sets and other products.

"It's just a great way to take a moment for yourself during the day to do something that's good for the mind, the body and the spirit," Bigelow said.

Many people also ascribe a mystical quality to tea. So at Bottom of the Cup Tea Room in New Orleans' French Quarter, customers who cozy up to a cup of tea can both drink from the leaves and have them read. The fourth-generation shop opened in 1929 and has always offered fortune telling as part of its tea experience.

"You already have the old world charm, the antiquity of the French quarter. This adds to that," owner Tom Mullen said.

On the Net:

Tea Council: www.teausa.com

Information Resources: www.infores.com

Beverage Marketing: www.beveragemarketing.com