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Tradition To Trend: Global Tea Rivalries Are Redefining The Beverage

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Dive into the steeped world of tea where controversy brews over a salty cup, family businesses ... [+] GETTY

Tea and how you take it can be a contentious issue. So much so that reaction to a recent scientific study might compel the Brits to throw a Boston Tea Party of their own, but more on that to come...

Brewing a Global Beverage

Plenty of countries lay competing claims to have been the driving force behind tea's global popularity. From an agricultural perspective, tea was first cultivated in the region encompassing parts of modern-day Southwest China, Tibet, North India, and Myanmar. It became such a hit that its consumption spread throughout China and, over the centuries, became an integral part of Chinese culture.

Tea's popularity eventually reached Japan, where locals created their own varieties and tea rituals. In the 16th century, tea reached Europe primarily through Portuguese and Dutch traders. It quickly became a luxury commodity, with British planters beginning large-scale production.

Today, tea is a global beverage with many cultural adaptations. Taking the vast array of types and flavors together, tea is the second most consumed drink after water, beating out the next closest contender, coffee, by a wide margin.

Another Boston Tea Party?



A study suggesting salt as an ingredient for the perfect tea sparked humorous backlash from the US ... [+] BETTMANN ARCHIVE

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A recent study by Michelle Francl, a US scientist, claimed that the perfect tea called

for a surprising ingredient: a pinch of salt. As a result, the US Embassy in the UK declared her research outrageous. The Embassy jokingly clarified that adding salt to Britain's national drink is not official US policy. It begs the question, should this simmering disagreement boil over, will Britain soon set the table for a Boston Tea Party of its own?

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Two Tea Giants

According to Cindi Bigelow, specialty tea was revolutionized by David Bigelow (Cindi's Dad) around 1960 when he took the tea category from gift shops to the retail industry at large. Cindi took the reins of the Bigelow Company in 2005 and recently told me how proud she is that her family business is now the number one tea company in the US, with more than 150 varieties of tea products. That's terrific growth from the original "Constant Comment" tea formulated by her grandparents. The company boasts over \$200 million in sales and 450 employees (or extensions of the family, according to Cindi). Recent TV commercials emphasize that Bigelow is 100% family-owned and plans to remain that way.

The company has three domestic manufacturing facilities (in Fairfield, Connecticut, Boise, Idaho, and Louisville, Kentucky) along with the US's only tea garden, located in South Carolina.

Tea Variations

Talk about options - black, green, white, oolong, herbal, or Pu-erh. In a recent interview with Don Vultaggio, founder of Arizona Iced Tea, he recalled the early days of business when others in the industry thought it was preposterous to put tea in a can. He certainly proved them wrong! Don stands by his company's motto, "Taste Matters," and applies the philosophy to all Arizona products. Like the Bigelow's, he is also proud of what he and his sons have

accomplished, particularly while maintaining the business as 100% family-owned.

The Vultaggios aren't resting on their laurels either. Arizona joined the ranks of hard teas last year and has opened over 250 distributors.

Hard teas – a category describing teas with alcohol – have become a hot commodity and very competitive category, as illustrated by Monster's new line of hard teas and the purchase of Hoop Tea in 2021 by AB InBev. Studies predict the category will benefit from a nearly 25% growth rate through 2030 – and that's on top of an already staggering \$2 Billion market in 2021. Coke and Molson launched Peace Hard Teas in 2023 as new entries try to cut into the 91% market share of hard teas owned by Boston Beer SAM +0.2%, as reported by Bump Williams Consulting.



The tea industry has expanded to offer a diverse range of options, while innovative companies are ...
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Infused Teas

Tea infusions offer the addition of all kinds of bold flavors to your favorite cuppa by combining herbs, spices, fruits, or flowers with the tea leaves to create a more complex and personalized taste profile. These additional ingredients are steeped alongside the tea leaves, allowing their flavors to meld together. For those who desire a different kind of strong brew, cannabis-infused tea may fit the bill, age and other legal restrictions permitting. For what it's worth, Cindi says she loves the idea that

people are enjoying tea — however they like it. But she suggests that, while she can appreciate that tea plays different roles in people's lives and remains dedicated to Bigelow's aim to create the perfect tea for every palate, Bigelow does not believe cannabis-

infused tea is in their immediate future. Arizona's owners feel similarly.

While hard teas and the ready-to-drink category may not be in Bigelow's immediate future, Arizona has steeped itself in the cold-brewed tea arena and is doing well with it.

Innovative Uses of Tea

Tea can be used as a culinary ingredient, as a marinade base, or for baking. Not a fan of the flavor?

Forget about cucumbers and use tea

bags for puffiness around the eyes, or lather it in to alter your hair color or provide anti-oxidant-based skin benefits as a bath bomb.

In the outdoors, tea rolls up its sleeves and gets to work as a fertilizer or a pest repellent. Inside the home, it can be used as a deodorizer, glass cleaner, wood polish, cookware cleaner, or an air freshener. Tea first came to prominence as a traditional Chinese medicine and can help with a sore throat or ease sunburn pain.

Perhaps its best use is to create custom tea blends by mixing leaves, herbs, and spices and offer that as a thoughtful and personalized gift.

Tea is truly a universal product, according to Cindi, and no matter how different ways tea can be utilized, it's best to drink. Who knows what product comes next for Arizona, perhaps they'll try putting the "tea" in T-shirts?

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Tea infusions, enriched with a variety of ingredients, offer a customized flavor experience, with ... [+] GETTY



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