

COOKING WITH TEA

One evening, I infused a pot of buttered spinach with earthy smokiness from a spoonful of Lapsang souchong tea leaves and created a delicious mess of greens. I have been hooked on cooking with tea ever since.

I AM NOT ALONE IN THIS PASSION FOR USING TEA as a flavouring in cuisine. Cooks in China have been using tea to their advantage for thousands of years. Stuffed into fish, stir-fried with vegetables or cooked into soup, tea has long added its voice to the choir of flavours inherent in simple foods. In the West, tea has only recently taken the stage as a culinary herb. Touted for its myriad health benefits as well as for its delicate and astringent taste, tea is also rapidly becoming the next "in" food to be exploited in a market hungry for novelty.

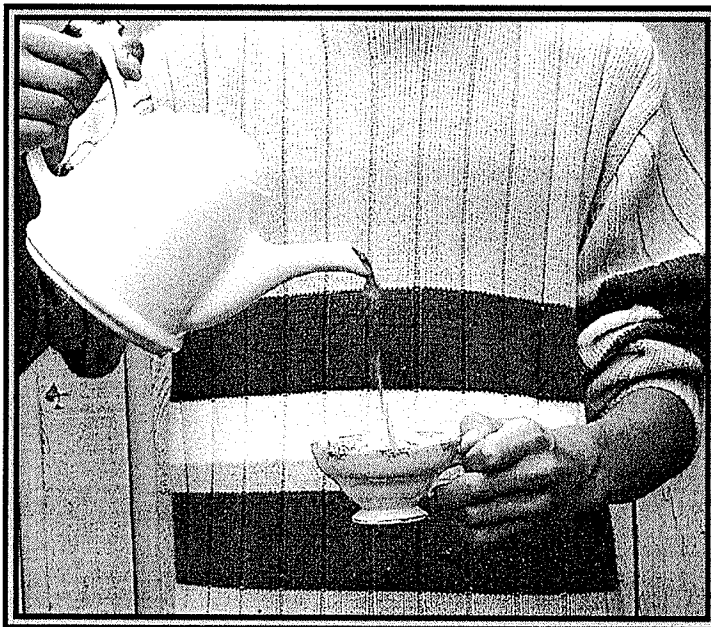
As with any food trend, cooking with tea has its share of examples of enthusiastic and misguided over-use. Since the night of my spinach triumph, I have found and tried numerous recipes that did not live up to the hype, delivering a bitter, one-dimensional flavour, or, at best, zero tea taste in preparations that could have been more easily made with water. Too many others are sad imitations of better recipes, in which the presence of tea is simply a neat gimmick and not an inspired use of a new ingredient. Please spare me the "apple-cinnamon" cake made, not with crisp apples and fragrant cinnamon, but with the contents of a commercial apple-cinnamon-flavoured teabag!

Despite these pitfalls, I have been entranced by the new flavours I am discovering daily. The smoke of Lapsang souchong is, of course, a favourite, finding its way into tomato soup, a pot of beans and maple-balsamic vinaigrette. Earl Grey, a black tea perfumed with oil of bergamot, made a stunning salad dressing and pan sauce, once I learned to gently infuse its oils into room temperature rum. The intoxicating fruit and flower aromas of such traditional flavoured teas as jasmine, Japanese cherry and lychee have become the basis of my new craze for sorbets and flavoured syrups.

While black teas enhance many recipes with a pleasant earthy undertone and tannic bite, green teas are harder to love in cuisine. They are more bitter and their mild grassy flavour is difficult to detect even in the plainest dishes. I had the most consistent results using matcha, an emerald-green powdered tea used for the famous Japanese ceremony. For hard-core green tea lovers only, this powder can be directly sprinkled onto vanilla ice cream for a knock-your-socks-off version of green tea ice cream, or mixed with a little lemon juice and drizzled over grilled prawns, providing a lovely herbaceous hit.

Producing these wonderful flavours is not as simple as wantonly throwing tea into your favourite recipe. Tea leaves, unlike spice seeds and herb leaves, are not packed with aromatic essential oils. Their subtle and nuanced flavours are easily overwhelmed by spices and don't carry well over starches. Longer brewing in an attempt to get stronger flavours will only produce disastrously bitter and tannic meals. To get the most out of cooking with tea, choose recipes that allow the leaves' delicate mineral and earthy qualities to shine through, and then use proper tea-brewing techniques. Predictably, a simple liquid, be it a pan sauce, a sorbet, a syrup, a dressing or a clear soup, is the best medium for showcasing the refreshing flavour of tea. The best extraction techniques will maximize tea's flavour impact and minimize its bitterness.

For maximum flavour, brew a strong tea. For minimum bitterness, don't brew the tea too long. I achieve this seemingly impossible task by following a useful cooking tip gleaned from my research: use more tea leaves (up to four times more) for every cup of near-boiling water than you would if drinking the tea plain, but brew for no longer than five min-



utes. An even better method, for cooks with time to spare, is to steep the tea leaves in a room temperature liquid, such as water, vinegar, booze, syrup or stock, for up to 12 hours. I found this technique produced the most full-flavoured and refreshing concoctions with the least bitterness. Tea leaves are also easily infused into a pot of gently simmering butter. Strain the butter and use it to sauté vegetables or flavour other foods.

No matter which method of infusion you choose, always discard the tea leaves, unless you favour excessive tannins and bitterness in your food. And, most important, resist the temptation to press on the leaves to extract more flavour. You will extract only tears of frustration as your lovely dressing becomes overwhelmingly acrid.

Another tip to keep in mind: tea is at its best with familiar companions, milk and lemon. Acid ingredients seem to brighten and highlight tea, giving it a taste boost. Milk ingredients smooth out the bitter edge of a strong brew without at all dampening tea's flavour profile. I often found a squirt of citrus or a lick of cream brought that perfect finishing touch to a sauce made with tea.

Learning to cook effectively with any new ingredient takes time, practice and patience. With tea leaves, the effort is certainly worthwhile. Although tea does not enhance every recipe that comes its way, as some marketing gurus would have us believe, it is still full of exciting flavour possibilities for those with a yen for exploration and a dose of common sense in the kitchen. So the next time you are enjoying a golden cup of tea, consider the possibility that you may enjoy it even more if infused into your routine evening vegetables.

Heidi Fink is a chef and cooking class instructor in the Victoria area. Her favourite part about cooking with tea has been getting her two-year-old to love his spinach!

Lapsang Souchong Spinach

1 big bunch spinach OR 1 large bag of pre-cleaned spinach
 3 Tbsp butter
 1 1/2 tsp Lapsang souchong tea leaves
 2 cloves garlic, smashed, peeled and sliced
 Salt and pepper

In a small saucepan, heat together the butter, garlic and tea leaves over low heat. Heat for between 5 and 10 min-

utes, until the garlic begins to colour. Remove from heat and let stand while you prepare the spinach.

If using a bunch of spinach, remove the stems and wash the leaves in a sink full of cool water. Drain the leaves well and roughly chop or slice them. If using a bag of spinach, remove any large stems and chop or slice the leaves. Set prepared spinach aside in a bowl.

When spinach is ready, place a large skillet over medium-high heat. Strain the flavoured butter directly into the skillet. Discard the tea leaves and garlic. When the butter is hot, add the spinach to the skillet in batches, sprinkling each batch with salt and pepper. Use tongs to flip spinach around as it cooks. Cook well, so the spinach is meltingly soft and fully infused with the smoky garlic-butter.

Jasmine Tea Sorbet/Popsicles/Granita

1 1/3 cup sugar
 3 cups water
 Zest of 2 lemons
 3 Tbsp jasmine tea leaves
 1 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (from 4 to 5 lemons)

Combine sugar, water and lemon zest in a medium saucepan. Heat gently while stirring to dissolve sugar. Bring to a boil and boil for 3 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in jasmine tea leaves. Let sit for 4 minutes, then strain into a large bowl. Stir in the lemon juice. Place in the fridge to cool.

Once cool you can do one of three things with this ambrosial liquid. You can make a sorbet by pouring it into an ice cream maker and freezing according to the manufacturer's directions. You can pour it into popsicle moulds and freeze for gourmet popsicles. Or prepare a granita by pouring it into one or more shallow plastic containers and freezing for four hours. Stir with a fork every 30 minutes to make sure the ice crystals have a uniform texture.

Earl Grey Dressing/Pan Sauce

1/2 cup rum
 2 Tbsp Earl Grey tea leaves
 Zest of 1 orange
 5 Tbsp freshly squeezed orange juice
 Zest of 1 lemon
 3 Tbsp freshly squeezed lemon juice
 1 tsp dark brown sugar
 2 tsp white sugar
 1 heaping tsp salt
 1 tsp ground coriander
 1/2 cup safflower oil
 1/2 tsp toasted sesame oil (optional)

Soak the tea leaves in the rum for 12 to 24 hours. Strain the rum into a bowl, but don't press on the tea leaves to extract extra rum. This will only make the dressing excessively bitter.

Add all remaining ingredients to the rum and whisk well, making sure all the sugar and salt is dissolved. This dressing is delicious over steamed or roasted vegetables, especially potatoes and green beans. Dress the vegetables while they are still warm. The heat will help release the flavour of the tea-infused rum and will help the vegetables to soak up some of the dressing.

This sauce (minus the safflower oil) also makes an excellent pan sauce for sautéed chicken or fish.