

# The cup of *life*

Tea is the most commonly consumed beverage in the world after water, which is a good thing, writes JOANNA McMILLAN PRICE, as it's just so good for us

**B**ernard-Paul Heroux was, apparently, a philosopher back in the 1900s, but he seems to be known almost entirely for his quotes on tea — most famously: “There is no trouble so great or grave that cannot be much diminished by a nice cup of tea.” It’s a sentiment certainly shared by the English, but they’re not the only ones who enjoy a good cup of tea. Its origins are in China, where tea has been enjoyed for more than 4000 years.

There are many different varieties, green and black being the most common here in Australia, but with a little searching you will also find white and oolong teas. They all come from the same camellia plant, but undergo different processing to give them their characteristic flavours.

Green tea is popular in Asia, particularly in Japan, and has long been thought to have medicinal properties. Essentially, the difference between green and black tea is green tea undergoes less processing — it is simply the steamed and dried leaves of the plant — whereas, to make black tea, the leaves undergo an additional stage of oxidation before drying. This produces a darker, generally stronger, colour and flavour.

White tea is a specialty of the Chinese province of Fujian and is made from less mature leaves than green tea and is the least processed tea. Oolong is a traditional Chinese tea, somewhere in between black and green tea, being semi-oxidised. If you don’t like the slightly grassy taste of green tea, oolong may be for you.

Epidemiological studies have shown an inverse relationship between tea consumption and the risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases, including certain cancers. This has largely been attributed to the presence of potent antioxidants called polyphenols.

While all teas contain these antioxidants,

the level of processing the tea undergoes does affect the levels of the different types of polyphenols present. For example, white and green teas have a far higher quantity of catechins, shown in human and animal studies to have the potential to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer.

Green tea producers have been very good at advertising this fact and promoting their product’s health benefits. White tea has attracted more recent research attention. There is some evidence that, as the least processed tea, it contains the highest concentration of antioxidants. One US study found white tea to have more anti-viral and anti-bacterial properties than green tea.

But don’t be dismayed if you’re partial to a nice cup of English Breakfast. Black teas may have fewer catechins, but they contain more of a different polyphenol group called theaflavins. Whether there are greater health benefits from one or other of these antioxidants is not really known. In fact, several studies have found no difference in

**‘If you are cold, tea will warm you. If you are too heated, it will cool you. If you are depressed, it will cheer you. If you are excited, it will calm you.’ — WILLIAM GLADSTONE**

total antioxidant capacity of different teas, even when directly comparing green and black tea.

So to say one tea is healthier than another seems to be splitting hairs. There is convincing evidence for the benefits of all teas, including green and black, and so which one you choose to drink is up to you. Why not stock your pantry with different types to be sure of the full range of tea antioxidants?

If you’ve been paying attention to the latest advertisements from the tea companies, you

will be aware of another potentially beneficial compound found in tea: the amino acid L-theanine. L-theanine can cross the blood-brain barrier, where it has been shown to increase the level of various neurotransmitters, including those involved in mood and pleasure such as serotonin and dopamine, and promote alpha wave production.

This is thought to explain the findings that theanine can reduce mental and physical stress and promote relaxation. L-theanine may also boost the body’s immune system and help in fighting infection. It seems that Mr Heroux was onto something long before scientists worked out a probable cause.

Although the major tea producers have cottoned on to L-theanine, the highest concentrations are found not in leaf tea, but in Japanese powdered green tea called matcha. While you may not have seen or tasted matcha as a drink, you will be familiar with products flavoured with matcha such as green tea icecream, green tea noodles and even green tea-flavoured confectionery.

Starbucks coffee chain outlets in Japan, South Korea and North America even offer a matcha latte, so it may not be long before it hits our shores. Of course, while matcha may indeed have benefits to health and wellbeing, adding it to a food product does not necessarily confer the benefit. Icecream is still icecream, green or not.

On the downside, do be aware that black, green, white and oolong teas all contain caffeine. This is considerably less than in coffee and the caffeine from four to five



The beauty of chamomile tea — a health food in a cup.

If you want a tea that is caffeine free, you can choose from herbal teas or rooibos. These are not technically teas and should more correctly be called tisanes. Herbal teas are simply infusions made with herbs, flowers, fruit, roots, spices or other parts of the plant. They do not, therefore, contain the same polyphenols as tea, nor confer the same health benefits.

Also be aware that many of the health claims made on the packets of herbal teas are not proven and are somewhat dubious. Still, they are caffeine-free, calorie-free and may have other healthful qualities such as promoting relaxation and aiding sleep.

Rooibos comes from South African and is becoming increasingly popular here. It does boast a high content of antioxidants and is both caffeine and tannin-free. You make it in the same way you make black tea, but may want to leave it to brew a little longer to allow the full flavour to develop. In South Africa, they usually add milk and sugar, but it is delicious without and is, of course, completely kilojoule-free

when enjoyed in this way.

One final word: watch out for the tea products increasingly hitting the shelves. Iced tea drinks, chai tea and tea-flavoured beverages are not necessarily healthy just because they are made from or contain tea.

Many contain just as much sugar as regular soft drinks and/or have added preservatives, flavours and other additives. They're not all bad, though, and it's not hard to differentiate the good from the bad — just read the ingredients list. ■

cups of tea a day has not been shown to cause any harmful effects, while potentially providing great benefit. Nevertheless, if you are sensitive to the effects of caffeine, or are pregnant or breastfeeding, moderate your tea consumption accordingly.

The other negative of tea drinking is the tannins in tea reduce the absorption of plant-based iron. That's a simple one to solve: drink your tea between and not with your meals. This is particularly important for vegetarians and vegans.

Whether adding milk to your tea affects the nutritional benefits is not really known; on balance, the weight of evidence so far suggests not. However, one study just published found the addition of milk prevented the vascular protection benefits of tea.

If you like tea without milk, great, but if you prefer it white, my advice is to continue drinking it that way. My thinking is that you'll drink more and therefore increase the potential for benefit. But do choose a low-fat milk and skip the sugar.