Tea: Not Just for Drinking

Learn how to use these healing herbs for cooking too!

May 28, 2009 By Kellee Terrell

When we think about tea, many of us instantly imagine a tall glass of iced tea in the summer or a cup of piping hot herbal tea in the winter. But, tea is more than a satisfying seasonal beverage—it's a growing staple in American cuisine. "People in the United States are becoming more focused on the totality of health—mind, body and soul—so the food is reflecting that, and using tea as flavoring is a part of that shift," says Rona Tison, senior vice president of corporate relations at tea manufacturer Ito En.

It's a fact: Numerous studies indicate that tea may have a wealth of potential health benefits, especially green tea. Drinking it may enhance your immune function, positively affect cholesterol and blood pressure levels, reduce risk of developing heart disease and some cancers and prevent dental cavities and gingivitis. How? Researchers believe it's due to green tea's high level of flavonoids—plant-based organic compounds known for their antioxidant activity. Antioxidants stop free radicals—molecules that can cause harmful chemical reactions—from hurting our bodies by causing cancers and other ailments.

One recent study conducted at the University of California in Los Angeles found that drinking three cups of green or black tea daily can lower your risk of having a stroke by 21 percent."Green tea is fantastic for you and is important because we live in a toxic society, which poisons our water, air and food," says Atlanta-based chef Asata Reid, a.k.a. the Life Chef. "It's a much-needed antioxidant bomb."

Other teas, such as oolong, white and other black varieties—differentiated by the amount of fermentation each undergoes—boast health benefits too. They are a rich source of vitamins and minerals—particularly carotene and vitamins C, B-1 and B-9 (folic acid). In addition, the caffeine—a stimulant—in tea is good for you when the beverage is consumed in moderation. (The caffeine in tea is released in the body much slower than it is in coffee.)

But to reap bonus benefits from these tiny little tea leaves, we can do more than just drink this healthful brew. Let's shift our focus from the kettle to the skillet as the Life Chef shares with *RH* four of her delicious tea-inspired recipes, perfect for summertime feasting.

Chai Spiced Mushrooms

This simple side dish is ready in less than 10 minutes. Mushrooms easily absorb the delicate tea flavors. Try steaming fish, zucchini or dumplings over your favorite teas and herbal infusions, such as ginger, lemongrass or hibiscus. Serves 4.

1 cup fresh button mushrooms
1 cup fresh baby portobello mushrooms
2 Celestial Seasonings India Spice Chai tea bags
2 cups water

Place 2 cups of water and the tea bags into the bottom of a steamer or large pot. Put mushrooms into the steamer basket, insert into steamer or pot and cover with a lid. Bring water to a high simmer (180° to 200°). Steam the mushrooms for about 7 minutes or until tender.

Per ½-cup serving: 21 calories, 0.15 g total fat, 0.025 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 10 mg sodium, 1.6 g total carbs, 0.48 g dietary fiber, 0.8 g sugar and 1.5 g protein.

Oolong Tea and Black Pepper Crusted Tofu
This simple crust uses only three ingredients, which allows the subtle oolong tea flavor to prevail. The spicy crust is a great complement to grilled steak and fish as well. Try using your favorite teas and adding some orange or lemon zest for extra pizzazz. Serves 4.

1 pound extra firm tofu block, drained and sliced lengthwise into 4 pieces
1 oolong tea bag
1 tablespoon black pepper
½ teaspoon salt

Place tofu on paper towels to drain as much liquid as possible. In a small bowl, combine salt, pepper and the contents of the tea bag. Discard the bag. Sprinkle tea mixture liberally on one side of each tofu piece. Place tofu, seasoned side down, onto a hot grill pan, or sear it in 1 tablespoon of oil heated in a skillet. Season the top side of the tofu. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes then flip over the tofu. Cook for another 3 to 4 minutes. Serve immediately.

Per 4-ounce serving: 121 calories, 7 g total fat, 1 g saturated fat, 0 g cholesterol, 85 mg sodium, 4 g total carbs, 3 g dietary fiber, 0 g sugar and 13 g protein.

Jasmine and Cardamom Scented Rice
This whole grain rice dish is simple to prepare yet pleasantly complex with delicate floral aromas and green tea flavors. Cardamom pods infuse it with a hint of exotic Indian cuisine while the jasmine tea delivers sweet scents from the Far East to the table. Serve with sautéed vegetables and steamed fish for a quick and light repast. Serves 6 to 8.

1 8 oz. cup of brewed
jasmine green tea
1 8 oz. cup of water

1 cup of brown jasmine rice
3 cardamom pods
Pinch of salt

Combine tea and rice in a pot, season with salt and bring to a boil. Stir cardamom in the rice, cover with a lid and reduce heat to medium-low. Allow the rice to cook for 20 minutes or until the liquid is absorbed and the rice is tender. Fluff the rice with a fork and remove cardamom pods before serving.

Per 4-ounce serving: 160 calories, 0 g total fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 g cholesterol, 0 mg sodium, 35 g total carbs, 1 g dietary fiber, 0 g sugar and 4 g protein.

Green Tea Fourth of July Smoothie
Red strawberries, white frozen yogurt and blueberries make this green tea smoothie a patriotic treat for a hot July night. Makes two 12-ounce smoothies

2 cups frozen vanilla yogurt
1½ cups frozen strawberries
1 cup frozen blueberries
2 green tea bags

Brew tea in 1 cup of hot water and allow to cool to room temperature. Gently squeeze the tea bags before discarding them. Combine strawberries, blueberries and yogurt in a blender and pulse several times. Turn the blender to the puree setting and gradually pour in the tea while the smoothie is mixing until it reaches desired consistency. Serve immediately.

Per 12-ounce serving: 296 calories, 9 g total fat, 5 g saturated fat, 30 mg cholesterol, 123 mg sodium, 54 g total carbs, 4.5 g dietary fiber, 42 g sugar and 9 g protein.

Creamy Mint Tea and Cucumber Dip
This creamy spread is perfect for the lactose intolerant, thanks to Tofutti Better Than Cream Cheese. If you are averse to soy products, substitute light cream cheese. The garnish of fresh mint enhances the tea's subtle mint flavors. Serve this dip with baked pita crisps and fresh vegetables for a healthy and refreshing summer snack. Serves 6 to 8.

2 bags Clipper Organic White Tea With Peppermint
1 small cucumber, peeled, seeded and diced
8 ounce Tofutti Better Than Cream Cheese, plain
2 tablespoons fresh mint leaves, thinly sliced

Brew the tea bags in 1 cup of hot water. Steep and cool in the refrigerator until chilled. Gently squeeze the tea bags before discarding them. Combine Tofutti, tea and mint in a food processor or blender and blend until smooth. Transfer the Tofutti mixture to a bowl and stir in the diced cucumber. Cover and refrigerate for at least 15 minutes. The mint flavors will become stronger

with time.

Per 2-tablespoon serving: 86 calories, 20 g total fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 541 mg sodium, 37 g total carbs, 0.3 g dietary fiber, 9 g sugar and 4 g protein.

Log onto Reid's blog, Life Chef's Food for Life (lifechef.blogspot.com), for more recipes and tips on healthy living.

GREEN LIGHT

While numerous studies verify green tea's health benefits, those who drink it often complain about its taste. "Many claim that it's bitter, but that's because they are boiling the water [and the liquid becomes] too hot," says Rona Tison of tea manufacturer Ito En. "Water temperature is crucial."

Tison shares these tips for the perfect cup of green tea:

- Make sure you have a good tea leaf or tea bag that is stored in a dark container away from sunlight or moisture. We store ours in a container with a lid or in the fridge.
- The water doesn't need to be super hot. Make sure the water is between 175° and 195°. Any temperature hotter than that burns the leaves, which gives it that bitter taste.
- Share it with your friends—tea is about relaxing and being sociable.
- Don't have time to brew a fresh cup? Not a problem. *RH* recommends Ito En's Oi Ocha ($1.50, 16.9 fl. oz.). It's Japan's No. 1 selling bottled green tea and is gaining popularity in the states. It's a perfect substitute for sugary sodas loaded with high fructose corn syrup, which docs believe plays a key role in this country's obesity epidemic. Tison says: "With the natural progression of people moving away from sodas, it makes sense that people want to drink something that is refreshing and tasty minus the chemicals and sugar.

We say, "Ahhh!"

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