

LIVING

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Big blue thoughts

World views take on a new meaning for Earth Day E3



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It took only a couple of hundred years, but Americans are finally warming up to tea again.

Inside the St. James Tearoom in Old Town on a recent Tuesday morning, nearly two dozen locals lined up to be seated and served pots of piping hot black, oolong and white teas and a brunch of cream scones, strawberry rhubarb crumble and handmade tea sandwiches.

Across town at Bubble Tea & Coffee in Cottonwood Mall, teenagers suck up bubble teas — fruit-flavored and milk teas served with tapioca balls at the bottom of the cup — through fat straws.

Inside La Montañita Co-Op in Nob Hill, shoppers stuff bags with loose-leaf yerba maté, chai tea ingredients and herbs like chamomile, hibiscus and peppermint.

Those are three distinct tea experiences but they all add up to one thriving and diverse tea movement in Albuquerque.

Ranging from fine imported teas in one of a number of local tearooms to bottled ready-to-drink teas in grocery stores, tea is everywhere. "I think tea is making an impact like it never has before," says Lonn Calanca, an in-house tea expert in the bulk department at La Montañita Co-Op. "We've had this coffee shop explosion in the past 10 years but now I see that tea is on the heels of that trend."

Taking its lumps

In 1773, the Boston Tea Party made it unpatriotic for Americans to drink black tea. By the time the American Revolution ended, coffee had eclipsed tea as America's drink.

In 2007, while coffee still fuels the majority of New Mexicans, tea has started to give java a run for its money.

Teahouses around the city now cater to the state's diverse tea-drinking crowd — an intimate hideaway at the St. James Tearoom runs about \$25 a person, while a take-out cup of loose-leaf herbal infusion at Collectabili Tea (7101 Menaul NE) will set you back a few bucks.

Daniel Higbie, who owns St. James Tearoom with his mother and father, says the burgeoning appeal of tea rests on the fact that many people lead hectic lives. Those people need an escape, one that can be found at the bottom of a cup.

When done right, tea can be a mode of relaxation and a medium for relationships, says Higbie. "Coffee is about jacking yourself up and being constantly on the go," he says. "That's the Starbucks culture. Tea, on the other hand, lends itself much more to relaxation and togetherness. People that

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steep thoughts

Loose, bubbling up or in the bag, tea makes a hot comeback

Tea's the hottest drink in town

from PAGE E1

come here treat us like a private escape where they can be with the people they love and care about."

Albuquerque's teahouses have come and gone over the years but owners like Higbie say the city's demand for tea is growing, especially among men. "We've been surprised that we've been getting more men, more and more macho guys," says Higbie.

"Albuquerque is becoming more sophisticated, and so people are coming in with more sophisticated tastes. We're doing well in Albuquerque — if that's not a testament that tea is getting bigger, what is?"

A decade ago, it was estimated that there were about 200 tearooms throughout the country, according to the Tea Association of the USA. Today, according to *Gourmet Retailer Magazine*, the country has about 2,000, not including the thousands of coffee shops that have added specialty teas to their menus. Since 1990, when wholesale tea sales hit \$1.84 billion, the industry has grown to \$6.16 billion, says the tea association. Some reports say the sale of teas is expected to nearly double by 2010.

On the bubble

Migrating from bigger American cities, bubble teas have made their way into Albuquerque. Store owners like Judy C'Debaca, owner of both *Bubble Tea & Coffee* (formerly *Lollicup Cafe*) locations, say the tea — often served with soft, sweet tapioca pearls — was invented for Taiwanese kids living fast-paced, cosmopolitan lives. "After school, kids are hungry and thirsty," says C'Debaca, who grew up in China. "That's how it was created. It satisfies the hunger and thirst all in one drink."

Bubble tea drinkers can choose from more than 60 flavors and combine them to make thousands of combinations. They can choose whether to add the tapioca pearls — called boba balls. C'Debaca says the drinks are popular with younger people because "if you're not exposed to this stuff it can be different and it's easier for younger people to try new things. But once they try it, they're hooked."

With the explosion in popularity of green, white and chai teas and yerba maté, it's tea — not coffee — that has earned a place on domestic trend spotters' "in" lists over the past several years.

Attracted to the health benefits, exotic variety and slow-down aesthetic, coffee drinkers are eschewing their super-charged elixirs for



ADOLPHE PIERRE-LOUIS/JOURNAL

Lon Calanca, a resident tea expert at La Montañita Co-Op, fills a jar of yerba maté. Along with white, oolong, chai and rooibos teas, yerba maté is finding more widespread acceptance among discriminating tea and coffee drinkers.



The Rev. Canon Don Cram enjoys a cuppa at St. James Tearoom near Old Town. He says he makes it a point to partake of tea with company at least once a month.

JAEALYN DEMARIA/JOURNAL

alternatives.

Calanca says he used to be one of those "12 espresso-a-day" coffee drinkers. That was until he discovered yerba maté — a stimulating herbal drink from South America that derives from the holly plant. "People like caffeine," says Calanca, "and people who drink lots of coffee don't switch to tea very easily. But what you find is people like myself that have been longtime coffee drinkers, we cross over because you realize that coffee can be fairly hard on the system. We realize that we can get our caffeine and drink something that's beneficial."

Health is the selling point for most hard-core tea drinkers. A trip through a natural food store's grocery aisle yields a cornucopia of teas intended to help with allergies, colds, gender-specific health and energy. Research on green tea has given rise to a number of positive results claiming that tea can boost longevity, help digestion, reduce stress, enhance immune functions and even fight the risk of heart

attacks, strokes and cancer.

In a recent study by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in Japan, green tea was associated with longer life. The study followed 40,000 Japanese men and women over a seven- to 11-year period and found that the more green tea they drank, the lower the risk of dying early. Most teas — meaning black, green and white tea harvested from the evergreen shrub *camellia sinensis* — contain powerful antioxidants called polyphenols. The study concluded that those antioxidants have the power to reduce the risk of many common chronic diseases over a lifetime.

Besides water, tea is the most widely consumed beverage in the world. And while green tea may be the most healthful, black tea is the world's most popular. The difference between true teas — black, oolong, green, white — is in the length of time the leaves are allowed to cure in a process called oxidization. Black tea is oxidized for the longest, giving the tea its taste

and color changes. Green and white tea aren't oxidized and oolong is slightly oxidized, making it stand somewhere between green and black tea.

Tea is so varied and globally known that connoisseurs ponder, taste and judge it like they would fine wines, brandies and whiskeys. "Tea is drunk to forget the din of the world," wrote 16th-century Chinese tea philosopher T'ien Yiheng.

Mary Alice Higbie has run the St. James Tearoom for more than seven years and is a professional in tea etiquette, history and mythology. She prints a monthly tea newsletter and oversees her business' rotating menu. She's glad tea is making a comeback; for Higbie, it's a sign of good things — a throwback to gentility, civility, beauty and relaxation.

"Tea is coming back because our culture needs it," she says. "There's nothing in our fast-paced coffee culture that really encourages close relationships, that encourages health and beauty. We need everything that tea stands for."