

## HENRIETTA LOVELL TEA CHAMPION

According to tea expert Henrietta Lovell, it's the perfect accompaniment to food. Over silver tip oolong and wafer thin cucumber sandwiches in her boho Camden flat she explains, "Tea refreshes the palate and goes with flavours – coffee fills the palate so you can't taste anything else."

She should know. Henrietta's tea import business, the Rare Tea Co, supplies top restaurants including Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck and Angela Hartnett's Murano, as well as retailers such as Waitrose and Sainsbury's.

An elegant thirtysomething with more than a touch of the Forties about her, until eight years ago she was a corporate high flyer, living on New York's trendy Upper West Side and working in finance. The job took her to the Far East, where "entertaining clients means buying expensive tea rather than flashy wine", and over a £100 pot, she was bitten by the tea bug. "Every cup tasted differently delicious. I started to spend any spare hours on work trips researching tea and visiting growers."

But Henrietta's life was about to change dramatically. Her father fell ill, so she had to come home to Britain, and his death

**DID YOU KNOW...** In 1968 only three per cent of households used teabags. Now, the figure is 96 per cent. But will leaves make a comeback?

made her reassess her priorities. She set up the Rare Tea Co and had hardly placed her first order when she herself was diagnosed with breast cancer. "Oolong, like the one we're drinking now, was the only tea I could drink when I was having chemo.

Thank goodness I had the business to concentrate on," she says. Five cancer-free years later, the business is thriving, importing the best teas direct from small farmers and guaranteeing them a good price.

According to Henrietta, tea is like fine wine. "Black, white or green, it all comes from the same plant, a camellia, but different varieties and growing conditions play a huge part in its character."

Although we Brits slurp down six cups

a day, most of us aren't drinking the best, she says. Our bitter tea bag brews need lashings of milk and even sugar to make them palatable, but "a really good tea can be drunk black." (Not that there's anything wrong with milk in tea, she adds quickly.)



**TEA FOR TWO** Henrietta Lovell's RAF blend raises money for the Wings Appeal



**UNIFORM ATTRACTION** A proper brew now has pulling power

Tea bags, however, are always a no-no. They're usually filled with finely ground leaves, or 'dust', which brews quickly but has more tannin than flavour. Really good tea is made with whole leaves that need to unfurl in hot water to release their flavour – a tea bag, however posh, is just too small for that to happen. That said, scraping leaves from the bottom of the pot is no one's idea of fun. "Use a sink strainer, then tip the leaves into the compost," says Henrietta. "At least there's no messing around with a dripping tea bag."

Is it worth the extra seconds? Drinking this fragrant, complex brew, I'm in no doubt. Henrietta agrees. "With leaf tea you are getting complexity. It's tea in 3D." **A**

## PERFECT TEA The rules to follow – and one to break

**1 ALWAYS PUT FRESH WATER IN THE KETTLE.**

**WHY?** Boiled water has lost most of its oxygen – vital for extracting flavour from the leaves.

**2 USE A GLASS, STAINLESS STEEL OR (BEST OF ALL) CHINA TEAPOT, BUT NEVER A SILVER ONE.**

**WHY?** Silver will taint the tea.

**3 LEAVE THE KETTLE TO COOL FOR A FEW SECONDS BEFORE POURING**

**WHY?** The softer, sweeter flavours in tea develop at lower temperatures, while the bitter tannins dissolve at 100°C. The only time boiling water is best is with low-grade tea (the stuff in tea bags) which is all about

tannin. If you use 80°C water on a tea bag you'll just get grey water.

**4 DON'T WARM THE POT WHY NOT?** Servants used to brew tea in the kitchen pot, then strain it into a more elegant one, which would be pre-warmed to stop the tea cooling too much on the way upstairs. Unless you live in Downton Abbey, it's pointless.