

Calendar

Sweet Is at the Tip of Your Tongue

Tea Tasting and Presentation

When he is asked to name the weirdest tea that he has ever drunk, Michael Figgins says, "I don't really think of them as weird, but, yeah, chai tea with yak butter is pretty far out there. Yak butter is what it's traditionally cut with. Chai was never meant to be a cream-and-sugar kind of thing."

The 29-year-old tea specialist is talking strictly loose tea. Rather than stuffing it into a tea ball, try spooning it into the bottom of a pot, he suggests, preferably one made of clay or porcelain. (Tea bags aren't even in this discussion, as you probably guessed.)

LOCAL EVENTS

Tea balls are made of metal, and the tea takes on their unpleasant taste. They also

prevent the tea from going through its "agonizing."

"The agony of the leaves," says Figgins, occurs when they open up completely, allowing "those nice chemical reactions" to happen.

He is urged to speak some other phrases of his trade, which includes blending teas, and he becomes as acronymic as a bureaucrat. "Broken Orange Pekoe" or B.O.P. is one classification of black tea. "It has short, broken pieces of leaves. You steep it just two or three minutes." Without knowing it, most of us drink B.O.P. It's at the bottom of the price range. At the apex is "F.T.G.F.O.P." — short for "Fancy Tip Golden Flower Orange Pekoe." He's able to say those letters very quickly.

A tea called China Jasmine Phoenix Dragon Pearl is up there in price, too. "It's a top pick, the bud of the plant, the first three leaves," says

Figgins. "It goes through a process, then it's tightly hand-rolled into little pearl shapes. You drop three pearls into a very small pot, one that holds maybe only four ounces, and steep them six minutes or a little longer. The tea takes a long time to get its really green color."

Some other high-priced teas, from China and Japan, should be steeped all day, says Figgins. "The longer, the better." Then you reheat them.

As a tea broker, Figgins buys tea for the market. What's the most expensive tea he has bought for his own personal use? "It was a Chinese oolong for \$4000 a pound," he says. "It was also the best tea I've ever had in my collection." What did it taste like? "It tasted like a real —, a sweet —, a floral —, almost like a —" He struggles. "It tasted better as it went." He struggles some more, then gives up. "It was very tightly rolled."

About 23 cups came out of that pound. "I had some with my wife and my cousin. I cut it up and distributed it around the family," says Figgins, who grew up in Chula Vista. "It was a one-shot deal, a championship tea." Meaning? "Every year China crowns a tea. The last one was crowned a couple of months ago. It's usually from a family tea estate that grows its champion garden."

Even \$5- or \$6-a-pound tea shouldn't be chugged. "You suck in the tea and take some oxygen into your mouth at the same time." So you volatilize the esters, just as you do at a wine tasting? "Yeah, exactly. And traditionally you spit it out, then lick the roof of your mouth, while you go through the points of gustation." Which are? "Sweet is at the tip of your tongue, sour is in the middle, bitter is at the back."

Figgins drinks five or six cups of tea a day. What kinds? "I go through my phases." What phase is he in now? "I am drinking one that came to me from China, an oolong that's been aged in a pomelo, which is like a giant grapefruit. They cut the insides out, pack it with tea, tie it up, and let the tea age in there. It takes on the citrus taste." What about caffeine and its



Michael Figgins

effects? Figgins, who also drinks his share of coffee, says he has discovered some decent-tasting decaffeinated teas. They're the water-processed, organic kind. The other types he finds "a little funky." Otherwise, the caffeine content in tea varies from some to a little to none, depending on whether the tea is black, green, or white. White? Yes, and he will tell you more about it and other teas on Saturday, when he prepares four different ones at the tasting in Balboa Park.

Figgins can't think of a tea so strange that he'd never want to drink it a second time. "At least not if it was *Camellia sinensis*" — the botanical name for the tea plant. "But as far as herbs go, tea made from cherry bark is

definitely not very tasty. Neither is licorice root tea, unless it's been roasted. And I've had plenty of tea at places where it wasn't prepared correctly. I would never drink tea at those places again." ■

— Jeanne Schinto

Tea Tasting and Presentation
Saturday, March 9
(second Saturday monthly)
11:00–11:45 a.m.
12:15–1:00 p.m.
Tea Pavilion
2215 Pan American Road
Balboa Park
Free
Info: 619-231-0470 or
www.teapavilion.com

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Balboa Park Tea House