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The beauty of tea: creating a sensual blend to satisfy the true tea drinker.

by Komanchek, Wendy

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Creating tea blends can easily be compared to wine making. Like winemaking, tea blending is both an art and science, developed over decades of tea tasting, learning, and experimenting--to the point where some tea blenders become intuitive on what herbs, leaves, blossoms, and flavorings work well together to produce a perfect cup of tea.

There are all kinds of blenders with their different opinions of what works well and what doesn't in a tea blend. One common link between these blenders is the use of quality herbs, spices and botanicals to create a unique taste to the teas that they put together.

Flowers, Spices, Herbs and Oils

Lalith Paranavitana, owner of Empire Tea Services in Columbus, Ohio, relates that he uses a cornucopia of flowers and herbs: sunflower and rose petals, hibiscus and orange peel, among a whole host of other herbs, oils and flowers to enhance his tea creations. "We purchase [our herbs and botanicals] from herb suppliers on the West Coast," he stated.

It's not just adding these different herbs, spices, flowers and oils together that create magic in tea. Paranavitana says, "Each herb or fruit additive has its own taste, appearance and character, which gives me an idea of their usefulness. Keeping this in mind, I add to other teas and flavored teas to enhance the 'look' and flavor of the existing tea."

Like most tea blenders, Paranavitana has been in the tea business for some 35 years. He's built his experiences, as other means of learning how to blend tea, to becoming an expert in the field. He says, "I've spent decades in tea factories in Sri Lanka learning the techniques of tea manufacturing. The most important aspect of manufacturing [tea] is grading. Grading means the different sizes of tea particles that are separated. Looking at the grade of the tea, I'm able to say what other grades would blend well with this tea. Primarily, it's a question of matching particle size. If you don't follow this very basic, but important rule, the so-called blend is merely a 'mix' and will not be cohesive. Most of the so-called 'blends' out there are 'mixes.'"

Cindi Bigelow, of R.C. Bigelow, Inc., Fairfield, Connecticut, agrees with Paranavitana. She and her sister, Lori, are co-presidents of Bigelow Tea, known as the "Constant Comment of Teas." Tea blending is in their blood, so to speak, because the tea company got its start in their grandmother's kitchen, where she recreated a colonial tea blend, which she called Constant Comment. That tea was invented in the 1940s, and since then, the Bigelows have continued the tradition of blending superior teas and botanicals into teabags, making them available in grocery stores, restaurants and other food outlets.

Lori Bigelow is the blender with over 30 years of experience. She and her team work hard to keep the quality of Bigelow teas competitive, as well as scoping out new blends for the public. Cindi Bigelow says, "We don't use tea dust in our teas. We use the larger, richer picked tea. In our Earl Grey tea, we use real oil of bergamot. My sister and her team spend a tremendous amount of time on tea blending, and they don't compromise on any ingredients or flavors."

Bigelow's Constant Comment is made from black tea, orange rinds, spices and natural flavors. They use a variety of ingredients in their other signature teas, such as: blueberry flavoring, pomegranate, lemongrass, rose hips, lemon peel, licorice root, orange juice, blackberry leaves, eggnog and ginger snap flavorings. And, that's only a sampling of the botanicals, spices and flavorings that they use in their tea creations.

Bigelow gets their Assam and Ceylon teas from different tea gardens around the world. From there, Lori takes the other flavorings that go into her tea very seriously; she looks for consistency. "When there's a new tea version, it'll take 12-15 blends to find the best one. It's like an art," Cindi Bigelow stated.

Lori takes a holistic approach when cupping her teas for the perfect blend. It takes an eight-person team to do 12-15 cuppings before they decide the perfect blend that Lori envisions. "Lori pictures in her mind what the tea should be and they [the team], work together to find that perfect mix that Lori has in mind," Cindi explains. "They think as if they're one mind. The mouth feel and color are important--it's a holistic approach."

Like Lori and Paronavitana, Bill Waddington of the Tea Source in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Peter von Kruse of J. Fr. Scheibler in Hamburg, Germany, both agree that it's the long years of tea blending experience that has gotten them and their companies to the place where they're blending experts in the business. Von Kruse emphasizes that J. Fr. Scheibler's mission is to first please their customers' taste buds. He says, "We use all the different and common ingredients, which are asked for by our customers."

Von Kruse's customers ask for black and green tea; blossoms, such as rose, mallow, corn flower, marigold, orange blossoms, safflower, sunflower and Osmanthus flowers, among others. They also ask for fruit pieces like papaya, pineapple, strawberry, dried grapes, elderberries, raspberries, blackberries and ginger. Some of the leaves and herbs that von Kruse's customers seek include strawberry leaves, mint leaves, fennel and lemon grass. They also look for fennel seeds, anise, cardamom, pepper, cinnamon, licorice, and flavors in liquid or granulated forms.

Von Kruse buys his flavorings from various dealers and traders located in Asia, Africa, India, South America and Europe. He also has German traders that sell him native flavorings to meet his customers' satisfaction. "Through the experiences, which our tea tasters have gained, they know which flowers and teas suit each other. We continue trying out new tea varieties with new and exciting flavors and herbs," von Kruse says. "Depending on what is required, sometimes a method of trial and error is inevitable, sometimes less necessary. For example, developing or creating a new product is more intricate; and thus, it requires more trial and error until everything fits harmoniously or excitingly together than when you are reproducing an existing mixture or blend."

Bill Waddington is more precise in his tea blending. He has decades of experience, like the other tea blenders mentioned in this article, but he starts his tea blending process by isolating that first unique flavor profile that he's developed over the years--whether that's a "silky note, a tart note, or any other combinations in my head," Waddington explains. "I have a century portrait that I want to impact when somebody drinks it. I have an idea of a blend before I start to build it."

Waddington explains that he reflects centuries as time periods--what tea blend best reflects the 20th Century, the 19th Century, and so on. He has also learned about tea blending by "literally brewing thousands of samples of tea every year," he explains.

He has disciplined himself with a mental database of what flavors and tea leaves go well together--it's not intuition, so to speak--but a learned knowledge gained through extensive experience. "I did it with more failures than successes--it's the only way to learn," Waddington says.

Von Kruse testifies to Waddington's insertion of trial and error. According to von Kruse, "Our tea tasters have had hard tasting lessons and experiences they've gained during their training time in the different tea regions. Now, they use exactly this knowledge to combine the right fruits and flavors with the right teas."

Cupping the Blends

"All tea traders have got their own, homemade methods for testing out new flavors," von Kruse explains. "For us, when we first decide to create a new product, we first look at which season we will present the product to the market, and also which direction the fashion of people are going."

Aside from tea tasting, von Kruse states, "the cupping process is essential. It is not only done to add some beautiful blossoms to the tea. Harmoniously combining tea, flavor, and other ingredients are most important--especially in the case where our customers have special or exotic requirements [for their tea blends]."

Since R.C. Bigelow Inc. is a 100% family-operated business; David and Eunice Bigelow are still involved in cupping the teas. Cindi states that the family's involvement in the business, "makes the difference" in the teas' flavor and appeal.

Paronavitana agrees with Waddington's methodology of tea cupping; cup one type of tea at a time--never all at once. Paronavitana says, "The cupping process should be confined to teas of one category at a time. If you're tasting black teas--they must be tasted together; greens together; flavored teas together; and so on. Green teas shouldn't be tasted alongside black teas or any other teas."

Paronavitana shares that he arranges the table where he's cupping from left to right and from light to strong. "One should avoid tasting a strong tea and then a light tea. If I'm tasting a variety of teas, I'll arrange them left to right, starting with white teas, green teas, oolong teas and black teas. Flavored and herbal teas should be tasted as a separate category."

Tea's Visual Appeal and the Other Three Senses

Paronavitana explains that the culture affects how customers view tea blends. He says, "We live in a very superficial era. Accordingly, the first thing anybody looks for is 'appearance.' After that is smell. If they don't like the smell, they will not taste the tea. Taste is the final test. Sometimes, a tea can look and smell great, but may not taste so good. Therefore, a buyer should know not to go on face value alone."

Waddington takes a different approach. As stated earlier, he focuses his blends on specific centuries in time. He literally blends his teas according to the look, taste, scent, and the mouth feel of the particular century that he's aiming to duplicate. He says, "Whatever century that I want to impact, I have a vision of what blend [will affect] the different senses upfront, and I choose my ingredients separately. I focus on all the senses--the visual in a given blend is as powerful as the taste, which is not an accident for loose leaf tea."

Cindi Bigelow agrees with the other blenders that all of the senses are important. But, she adds, the name of the tea blend is important too. She says, "All of it's important--the taste, the aroma, the look and the name."

Von Kruse emphasizes that his customers' reactions to different blends affects what teas are put together for their sensual appeal. He states, "[The testers] use their knowledge to combine the right fruits and flavors with the right teas. This know-how includes all aspects of the different senses, but still, we are learning something new everyday. Very often, new creations are developed together with our customers, who have some idea what type or character of tea they want, [including] visual appearance, scents, taste, feeling, and texture."

Von Kruse goes on to explain that J. Fr. Scheibler develops samples for their customers to try and comments on improvements. Then, the company

tweaks the blend to meet the customers' critiques. The customers receive a second sample to taste in order to establish a perfect blend. He states, "This iterative process goes on until the customer is 100% satisfied with the creation and approves our proposed sample."

He also says that his tea tasters have their own tea blending creations too, using new flavors, characteristics, or follow popular tea trends. "The results of such experiments are then proposed to customers, who can be convinced to try out our [new] creations," says von Kruse.

Miscellaneous Aspects of Tea Blending

The subject of tea blending manifolds many topics that tie in directly with the four senses. Of course, there's an argument between which comes first--the look of the blend versus the scent of the blend. Yet all aspects of tea blending are important when creating new blends that draw a customer following to your company.

The Bigelows emphasize the aroma of tea--especially since many of their teas come in bagged form. A customer can tear open a bag to look at the tea leaves, but most consumers will be attracted first to the scent of a Bigelow teabag. Matter of fact, Cindi encourages customers to smell the foil package that holds the teabag. It proves that the Bigelows stress the importance of tea freshness. Cindi states, "It's the aromatic experience of the tea [as a] fresh product. The foil covering protects the tea bags from absorbing other tea flavors."

Von Kruse admits that the nylon teabags allow customers to see the tea. "These teabags are practically transparent, and one can see clearly all the ingredients. The same goes for the triangular teabag, nylon or filter paper. If it's made of nylon, one can see everything clearly. If it's made of filter paper, the ingredients are practically invisible. In our opinion, it depends on the quantity of tea, in relation to the size of the bag whether the tea leaves have sufficient space or not, not the shape of the teabag."

Paranavitana weighs into the teabag argument by saying, "Only the pyramid style sachets allow large-size tea leaves, fruit and petals to be used, and the visibility can be appealing. However, this comes at a higher cost than using loose leaf tea. In other conventional teabags, dried fruit and botanicals have to be pulverized to match the small particles of tea, and the high level of moisture in these additives tends to cause problems in the machine, making it a deterrent to their usefulness."

Waddington views all teabags as gimmicks. He states, "A teabag is a teabag--it's not as good as loose leaf tea. It's reinventing to keep tea convenient."

Finally, tea blending is a combination of art and skill. Oftentimes, it's learned as a skill and evolves into an art, as the tea blender gains experience in acquiring the botanicals, herbs, fruits and teas work well together. Paranavitana states, "Blending is a much highly elevated art form; though not exactly scientific, it's a highly skilled art practiced by a few who truly know their craft."

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