

# Practice makes perfect

Think you have a pretty good tea service? Here are seven next-step things that will improve the tea experience of your customers.

Once upon a time, someone in the hospitality industry discovered you could get more than one brew from a bunch of tea leaves, sometimes with the result of better tasting tea the second or third time around. Thus, venues learned an easy way to satisfy tea drinkers – just add hot water.

In a world where simply offering loose-leaf tea in a pot is cause for tea drinkers to celebrate, going the extra mile is like New Year's Eve. Instead of compiling a list of gripes about the many ways that cafés don't understand tea drinkers, we thought it'd be more helpful to highlight some best practice examples you can emulate at your venue.

## 1. BETTER WATER

There are two ingredients in a good cup of tea: tea leaves and water. Kent Steedman, Australasian Specialty Tea Association (AASTA) Treasurer and proprietor of Tian He Tea House and Healing Arts in Sydney says good water is key. While we're confident you're not using stagnant water straight from a dirty puddle, we're less sure about whether the water you just put into the teapot just came from your

coffee machine and could be mildly coffee flavoured.

Tea likes freshly drawn, filtered water. Its biggest enemy is chlorine, which tends to embitter the taste. Additionally, the minerals in hard water cause it to taste metallic. At Tian He, Kent installed a filtration system that not only purifies tap water, but also re-energises it as part of the healing aspect of his business. You don't need to go that far, but consider installing a filter to remove chlorine and metals from the water for better tasting tea.

## 2. MORE ACCURATE WATER TEMPERATURE

Speaking of not using your coffee machine to dispense water for tea, another reason to avoid this practice is because the water is 85 to 95°C. This is too hot for green tea, which is best around 70°C, and not hot enough for black tea, which tends to like boiling water.

To get a more accurate water temperature, "buy a digital kettle," suggests Nathan Wakeford, AASTA President and founder of Chamellia. At a recent AASTA event, Nathan demonstrated how a small change in temperature made a big difference to both green and black tea. "For the green tea, a temperature of seven degrees hotter made the tea taste stewed. For the black tea, [at the same temperature, below optimum] the tea lost sweetness and body," he says.

## 3. MORE ACCURATE TEA VOLUME

Alongside your digital kettle, Nathan says consider purchasing a digital scale to weigh your tea. By amount, one teaspoonful of tea varies quite a lot

between varieties – if you've ever served jasmine roundies versus a standard English breakfast blend, you'll notice the difference straight away. The most accurate way to measure volume is through weight.

Volume affects the strength of the brew. A stronger brew requires more tea, not a longer steeping time. Your tea supplier should be able to tell you, in grams, how much tea is standard for the size of pot you use.

## 4. A TEA MENU WITH DESCRIPTIONS

A number of specialist cafés are now branching out beyond standard Arabica beans for their coffee, and have started to provide more descriptive ways of indicating the difference between varieties. The same should be the case with your tea menu.

Can you describe the difference between an English breakfast and a Darjeeling? They're both black teas with very different flavour profiles. As with a coffee connoisseur looking to branch out from the standard cup, you can't rely on tea lovers to know what the difference between varieties is if you're trying to get them to sip something new.

Start by sourcing more information from your supplier, says AASTA member Cathy Zhang of Ms Cattea. "Wholesalers should provide basic tea knowledge for café owners, such as a little booklet of some tea information for them to read."

Adeline Teoh, AASTA Communications Officer and event organiser for Sydney Tea Tastings, believes this should be extended to the tea drinkers as well.

"At a gelato store in Leichhardt (inner west of Sydney), where the Italian immigrant community introduced coffee to Sydney, on the counter was a special tea menu with descriptions and information about the tea by its supplier Tielka," she says. "Just having it there made me realise the place cared about tea drinkers as well as coffee drinkers."

## 5. QUALITY TEAWARE

"Buy quality ceramic teapots," advises Nathan, who says the quality of the teaware



Bygone Beautys in Leura serves customers traditional high tea – complete with top hat and tails to complete the experience.

PHOTO: David Hill, Blue Mountains Lithgow & Oberon Tourism



you use affects brew time and taste. “A great quality teapot could brew 40 seconds faster and release 20 to 30 per cent more aroma and flavour than a poor quality teapot.”

Also consider different teaware for different types of tea. In the same way you serve a flat white in a handled cup, and a latte in a glass for reasons known to all trained baristas, you should consider changing it up when serving different types of tea. “Use proper tea sets for different tea to enhance the appearance and fragrance of the tea,” says AASTA member Cathy.

## 6. BETTER PRESENTATION

We love latte art and wish there was some way tea could have its own skilled aesthetic to brag about. In the meantime, we love pretty cups and beautiful teaware, which can enhance the appearance of the tea, as Cathy has pointed out. Or, you could go the extra mile and perform a little tea ceremony in front of the customer, then present them the tea. This might have elements of gong fu, the traditional Chinese tea ceremony, or you could create your own memorable choreography. “Order traditional tea at Bygone Beautys in Leura and a waiter will wheel out the food dressed in a top hat and tails to the strains of ‘Pomp and Circumstance’,” AASTA Communications Officer Adeline reports. “I don’t even remember what the tea was like, but I’d go back for the experience.”

## 7. MORE TEA

Tea drinkers feel ripped off when they pay \$4.50 for a teabag in a paper cup, but on the flipside, all it takes is hot water for another infusion (if the tea will take it) to keep us happy. We especially love it when we’re offered a top-up without having to wave our arms to capture the attention of your staff.

How did you do? If you scored seven out of seven you’re already on your way to a making a memorable tea experience.