

FLAVOURED TEAS FIND FAVOUR

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Two city entrepreneurs walk us through the process of creating exquisite tea blends



As you catch a whiff of cinnamon, star anise and apples, it's easy to imagine that you have just been handed a plate of hot apple pie. Instead, we are looking down at a hot cup of tea called, rather poetically, Winter in a Mug. As more and more tearooms and artisan tea boutiques make their way into the city, there's a bewildering array of flavoured teas and tisanes at one's disposal. Joining the tea party are two freshly-brewed city-based entrepreneurs, Medha and Mayura Rao, who recently launched AusumTea, a line of organic, finely-crafted tea blends and tisanes (or fruit teas). United by their love for tea, the cousins gave up corporate jobs to spend the last one year brewing potions and testing them on friends and family. Neither has any formal training in tea blending – their learning has been through trial and error, kitchen experiments, research and consultations with experts. They have launched nine blends (three flavoured green teas, two flavoured white teas and four tisanes). They share what goes into the making of flavoured teas.

Tea from Darjeeling, flowers from Uttarakhand Despite India being a tea-drinking nation (pardon us, Bengaluru's coffee lovers), flavoured teas, at least the ones on most supermarket shelves, taste terribly synthetic or overpowering. Mayura, who has spent the last 10 years in the UK, found herself hauling tea blends back to Bengaluru when she returned to the city a year ago. "Though the alternate tea category has exploded, we felt that a lot of what's readily available is very singular in terms of flavour.

And India is home to a lot of fruits, flowers and botanicals that can actually complement tea so beautifully," Medha says. She notes that more people are sipping on green tea for health reasons, but taste has been altogether neglected. After all, many of us complain about the vegetal, bitter aftertaste of green tea.

Step one is using good quality loose leaf tea as much as possible. "Remember, fresh green tea brewed right is never bitter," says Medha. To that end, the duo is sourcing green, white and first flush black tea from an estate in Darjeeling after having tried samples from 16-17 tea growers across Kerala, Assam and West Bengal. Lighter green and white teas naturally lend themselves to flavour pairings.

Harnessing India's natural bounty was the next step – one that required time and patience. It meant finding a supplier for botanicals (leaves/herbs such as nettle, echinacea and seabuckthorn used in tisanes), dried lavender and liquorice root in Uttarakhand; sourcing marigold and jasmine from a farmer in Coimbatore and fruits from local wholesale markets.

Tasting & testing

One of their key principles while blending their teas has been to create a layered experience. "While mapping our flavour profiles, we realised that layering was important. We want people to get at least two different tastes from one blend – whether it's sweet and sour or tangy and spicy. So, there's a lead profile (what you taste right at the outset), a middle and a finish (what forms the aftertaste)," Medha adds. Using the example of their After 8 tisane, which makes for a good after-meal drink, she explains how the lead profile or start would be the slight tartness of apples and oranges, while the spearmint would surface later followed by an aftertaste of fennel (what is traditionally eaten after a meal). "Taste is a personal thing. Close to 700 people have tried our teas and everyone has a different input about what tastes and flavours they experience from the same tea." Of course, training their palates took time. The fact that neither of them smoke helps. Eating clean, non-spicy food to keep their taste buds open while making tea blends has become a way of life.

The science behind the art

The other important process they had to master was dehydrating the fruits for their blends. The first time they tried drying slices of apple at home in the oven, the sisters ended up with charred fruit. Mayura says, "It's important for the fruit to retain a certain amount of moisture so that it has flavour but doesn't spoil easily." A process that typically takes about 24 hours in an industrial style oven, called a dehydrator. The fact that Mayura is helping her father run a business that develops analytical instrumentation for pharma firms helped them with the technical know-how required. From measuring the optimal moisture in dehydrated fruits to figuring out shelf life, the scientific approach has helped set up a protocol at their Jayanagar manufacturing unit.

In the process of developing a few more flavours that they plan to introduce this year, including a Rooibos Chocolate blend, inspiration comes in many forms. Banana Nut Bread and Winter in a Mug, for instance, are dessert teas that aim to capture the essence of banana bread and apple pie. Hot Mango Mess, a white tea blend, plays on nostalgia invoking memories of a favourite summer treat – raw mango and chilli. Eastern Zing elevates the classic green tea and lime combination with flavours such as sweet lime, lemongrass and ginger.

And, the tea enthusiasts have a word of advice: the right brewing techniques make all the difference. Green tea and white teas are never meant to be boiled like good old masala chai. So, it's important to let the boiled water sit for a couple of minutes before you pour it over the tea. Also, flavoured teas make for great ice teas but you will need to brew them hot, then chill and serve.



Medha and Mayura Rao, founders of AusumTea

DIY TEA BLENDS SPICED GREEN TEA

Leading notes: Sweetness of cardamom and spice from clove
Ratio of loose tea, cardamom and clove: 4:2:1
Pound the cardamom and clove coarsely – best done the old fashioned way, by hand! In a container, mix tea leaves with spices in the proportion mentioned. Store in an airtight jar. The blend is ready to use immediately and can be stored for six months in hygienic, dry conditions.

ORANGE GINGER WHITE TEA

Leading notes: Citrusy orange and sharp ginger
Ratio of loose tea, orange, and ginger: 1:3:1
Sun dry sliced oranges and grated ginger, removing the fruit's seeds but keeping the peel intact. In a container, mix tea leaves with other ingredients in the proportion mentioned. Store in an airtight jar. The blend is ready to use immediately and can be stored for six months in hygienic, dry conditions.

ROSE MINT GREEN TEA

Leading notes: Citrusy-sweet lemongrass and cooling mint
Ratio of loose tea, lemongrass, and mint: 3:1:2
Dried rose petals and mint are easily available at leading stores. In a container, mix tea leaves with other ingredients in the proportion mentioned. Store in an airtight jar. The blend is ready to use immediately and can be stored for six months in hygienic, dry conditions.