

CATALOG CRITIC

Reading Some New Tea Leaves

UPTON TEA IMPORTS BEST OVERALL



ADAGIO TEAS BEST VALUE



THE REPUBLIC OF TEA



STASH TEA



IGOURMET.COM



IT'S TEA TIME. Make that, white-tea time. Lately, white tea—as opposed to black or green tea—has been getting a lot of attention for its possible health benefits. In 2003, scientists at the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State University found that white tea, which is higher in antioxidants, helped prevent tumors in the colons of mice, more so than green or black tea. Research from

Pace University in New York released last May showed that white tea was better than green tea at slowing the growth of viruses and bacteria. White teas use only the youngest tea leaves and buds, so the harvest is limited to months, days or sometimes—for the highest-quality tea—hours. While black and green teas generally go through more processing and heating, white teas are just steamed or sun-

dried. White teas are more expensive than green or black teas, but they do provide a pretty good value: High-quality whites can be steeped multiple times

STORE/PRICE/PHONE

Upton Tea Imports
Organic China White Paklum Tips, \$14.80 for 1.79 oz.
800-234-8327
Uptontea.com

QUALITY

Best Overall. Our expert had the highest praise for this variety. Unusual cocoa tones made for a “very special tea.”

SHIPPING COST/TIME

For \$3.80, in three days.

RETURN POLICY

Return the unused portion within two weeks if unhappy. No need to return the tea if there was an error.

PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE

Customer service helped us through the selection of 10 white teas, informing us that this one had a “buttery texture.”

COMMENT

Upton is currently out of stock but should have more tea in a few weeks. Tea comes in light-and-air blocking foil pouches.

Adagio Teas

White Peony, \$6 for 1 oz.
877-232-4468
Adagio.com

Best Value. Not as complex as our winner but with a good, and slightly more assertive, flavor.

Ground shipping costs a flat \$3.75. Our order arrived in three days.

Call for refund if unhappy. Company covers return shipping if there was a mistake.

There's live online customer service, but by phone, you have to leave a voice mail.

Site has a total of 11 varieties of white tea, including one silver needle.

The Republic of Tea

Silver Rain White Tea
\$22 for 1.75 oz.
800-298-4832
Republicoftea.com

The most expensive tea we ordered. It had nice flavor, but Ms. Gold thought it was “not quite as exciting” as the Upton tea.

Ground delivery cost \$4.99, and the tea arrived in four days.

Return within 30 days for refund or replacement. Customer pays for shipping.

Site has good descriptions and tips on preparation (use water that isn't quite boiling).

There also are nine white varieties for sale, mostly fruit-flavored, in teabags.

Stash Tea

Silver Needle White Tea
\$5 for 1 oz.
800-826-4218
Shopstashtea.com

An enjoyable, good-quality tea, but it didn't have the complexity or aromatics of our best cups.

Ground shipping, at \$3.95, took three days.

Mail back within 60 days. Company pays for shipping if there was a mistake.

When we called, customer service said people who like coffee might like this tea.

Site also carries tea in resealable pouches, which are better for storing delicate teas like this one.

igourmet.com

Shou Mei Tea
\$8.99 for 4 oz.
877-446-8763

This tea didn't have much to it. However, Ms. Gold thought it would go fine with a meal.

We paid \$6.04 for shipping, in seven days.

For replacement or refund. Call within five days of receiving order.

Gourmet-food site had almost 50 listings under “Tea - Loose,” but only four white teas.

The site likens this tea to oolong, calling it a more substantial tea than many other white teas.

without losing flavor, and nearly all of the caffeine is gone in the first brew.

Pale and Mild

More studies are needed to prove any real advantage to humans, but that hasn't stopped sales from reaching a boiling point. At Upton Tea Imports in Hopkinton, Mass., white-tea sales tripled from 2001 to 2004. Beverage maker Republic of Tea in Novato, Calif., introduced a line of bottled iced teas last summer. Compared with the green and black teas, the two white teas “blew the others away in sales,” said spokeswoman Marideth Post, and the company introduced three more whites in January.

Healthy or not, what makes a flavorful white tea? To find out, we ordered five loose-leaf varieties and took them to Cynthia Gold, the tea sommelier (who

knew?) for Swan's Café at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel & Towers. Seated at a table crowded with pots and cups, we learned that not all white teas are equal.

Most, but not all, white teas are pale and mild-tasting. The lowest-quality tea, called Shou Mei, comes from the opened leaves, resulting in a darker, more assertive drink. The Shou Mei Tea from igourmet.com (\$8.99 for four ounces) didn't fare so well with our expert, who said it had “no subtlety or complexity.”

The highest-quality white tea comes from buds that are just about to open, and often are called needles or tips. Ms. Gold thought the Stash Silver Needle White Tea (\$5 for one ounce) was good quality but tasted “a little faded,” she said. Stash agreed that the tea was a little off and recommended their alternative packaging, which is a resealable

pouch. The Republic of Tea Silver Rain White Tea was our most expensive (\$22 for 1.75 ounces), and Ms. Gold liked its hint of grassiness and complex flavor.

Upton Tea's Organic China White Paklum Tips (\$14.80 for 1.79 ounces) had even more body, and she commended its “mouth-filling ability” and “velvety cocoa tones.” Even our amateur palate detected a little spiciness and a sweet, lingering aftertaste. It wins Best Overall.

It's a good thing white tea is low in caffeine, because we still had one last cup to drink. The White Peony tea from Adagio Teas was a midrange mixture of buds and leaves. It didn't have the depth of the winner, but Ms. Gold called it “a lovely, everyday white tea,” with a smooth taste and some peppery notes. At \$6 for one ounce, it's our Best Value.

—Lisa Kalis

Shira Kravitz