

Sign of the Tea Times

Whether it's served in a cup or added to a facial mask, tea is flowing freely in day spas all over the globe.

by Teresa Hale and Denise R. Fuller

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ON ANY GIVEN DAY, MORE THAN 127 MILLION AMERICANS DRINK TEA. The consumer tea trend, which continues to gain momentum, began with a flux of marketing and media attention surrounding the health benefits of green tea. In the last decade, ready-to-drink tea offerings grew nearly tenfold, according to the Tea Association of the USA (teausa.org). The variety of teas found in supermarket aisles appear to be endless, and specialty teashops are seen alongside coffeeshops that now feature teas. Well-known beverage manufacturers quickly jumped on the bandwagon with their own bottled, bagged or powdered versions of the miraculous green tea. Why? Because the rest of the world is picking up on what Asian culture has known since ancient times—tea is good for us!

How good depends on which experts you ask or which findings you're referencing. In recent years, extensive research and clinical studies have been conducted to prove or disprove how tea—most often, green tea—positively affects the body. While the outcomes vary, the vast majority of professionals in medical and related fields agree that tea, when consumed regularly and liberally, promotes overall good health.

In the skincare world, green tea's claim to fame is its antiaging properties. Its powerful antioxidants rejuvenate the skin, increase elasticity and help ward off the free radicals that perpetuate aging. Green tea also has excellent anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties, making it an ideal choice for treating problem skin such as acne and protecting the scalp.

Green tea extends the effectiveness of sunscreen too, cutting down on photodamage and inflammation caused by the sun's ultraviolet rays. Green tea-based body wraps and cellulite creams are the gentlest, safest way to provide theophylline to the skin and reduce the appearance of cellulite.

Does drinking green tea treat the skin as effectively as applying it topically? The answer is no, according to Dr. Stephen Hsu, a cell biologist in the Medical College of Georgia's Department of Oral Biology. "The amount of green tea that gets to the bloodstream from drinking it is very low. By the time it reaches the skin cells, it's even lower," he says. "Green tea is more beneficial to the skin when applied topically because of a higher concentration of active ingredients. However, keeping those components active while penetrating the skin remains a challenge."

Tea has become a major selling point on the menus of renowned spas. Not only is it being served, it's being used in treatments and sold in home-care products. The teas found at spas tend to mirror consumer trends: Green is leading the way (it's hard to find a spa that doesn't offer a green tea treatment), with white and rooibos quickly catching up.

Tea Talk

At day spas, common tea-related practices include soaking towels and cloths in tea; steeping tea bags in facial steamers; draping the body in tea leaves or using them during massage; and adding tea in various forms—powder, leaves, extracts to scrubs, masks, body butters and carrier oils. Here's what some spa owners have to say about tea, along with a sampling of their prized tea-inspired treatments:



"Chamomile tea has been used to de-puff the eyes for ages; we're just returning to what works."

When building her spa, Sandra Mendez went much further than adding a few tea treatments to her service menu; she based her entire concept on white tea. "I wanted the treatments to match the things I believe in—organics, purity, cleansing the body, being healthy inside—so white tea was an obvious

choice," says Mendez, co-owner of **White Tea Spa** (whiteteaspa.com) in New York City.

From the "starters" to the "specials," the White Tea Spa menu revolves around organic white tea. Spa therapists serve it, steep their towels in it, brew it in their steamers and, of course, incorporate it into their spa treatments. For example, during the PuriTEA Detox Body Wrap, clients are cocooned in a warm blend of white and green tea. Essential oils are added to nourish the skin and drain lymph nodes of harsh city pollutants.

"White tea has very little caffeine, so it doesn't overstimulate or irritate sensitive skin," says Mendez. "It's gentle and pure. I prefer to use it on skin with circulation issues, like rosacea."

Located in downtown Manhattan, White Tea Spa draws an eclectic mix of clients, 30% to 35% of whom

are male. The spa's Mr. Tea Facial is a strong, dual-action treatment designed with men in mind. It's tailored for the texture and elasticity of men's facial skin. It starts with a deep-pore cleansing, followed by an enzyme peel, a moisture mask packed with tea leaves and a tea-infused serum.

