

# clover food lab

At Clover, we love to drink our plants. From carrot soda, to ginger lemonade, to TEA! Yes, tea. Tea is a plant!

Tea is the most common beverage consumed in the world (aside from water). Even without any sweetener added, tea can taste grassy, or vegetal, or astringent, or caramel-y.

Today, we have a very special guest writer on Veggie Monster!

Cassie of [Athena Teas](#) walked into our Food Dev meeting a few years ago, schooled Chris on water temperature, and opened our eyes to how delicious tea can be. Ever since then we've been serving her [Crimson Oolong Tea](#), [Forbidden Forest Green Tea](#), and [Golden Monkey Black Tea](#).



Hi, I'm Cassie McKenna and I'm the owner of Athena Teas. I'm originally from New Zealand and moved to the US in 2017. I grew up thinking that tea came in a bag and was served with milk and sugar, British style. It wasn't until I started traveling and living in Asia that I came across handcrafted teas that made full use of the flavor wheel, with tastes ranging from sweet and fruity, to floral, vegetal, or even earthy. The fact that there was so much flavor to be had out of "just leaves" seemed like miraculous news that deserved to be shared. I've been a supplier of single origin teas to Clover since attending one of Clover's Food Dev events back in 2018.

Tea is the most commonly served drink in the world (second only to water) but there are still a lot of misconceptions around how it is made. A common belief is that black tea comes from a black tea plant and green tea from a green tea plant. **In truth, what makes tea black, green, white, or oolong is what happens to the leaves after they are picked.** For example, both green and black tea can be made from multiple varieties of tea plant (including the same plant) and what distinguishes them is how much the leaves are allowed to oxidize after picking.

Making traditionally crafted teas, like we at Athena Teas specialize in, is an art form that ranges in complexity depending on the type of tea being produced. White tea is the least processed of all teas, undergoing withering and drying before being ready to be consumed. Rolled oolong tea on the other hand might be withered, bruised, pan-fired, rolled, and dried before they are ready to be consumed. The bruising and pan-firing steps help release the leaves' natural flavor compounds making for a more flavorful cup.

**The two questions I get asked the most are:**

1. **How to choose good tea?**
2. **How to brew it?**

Generally speaking, smaller pieces of leaf infuse faster, meaning the tea is more likely to develop bitterness or astringency (that 'dry mouth' feeling). That's why black tea bags that contain 'fannings' or really small pieces of tea, darken the water quickly but have a flat taste. By contrast, whole leaf teas are more expensive to create but better at conveying sweet, fruity, green, and floral flavors. **For a premium tea experience, look for more intact leaves and choose teas without added flavors or sweeteners.**

Something else that surprises people is that I recommend not being overly choosy about organic labeling. This is because almost none of the small tea farms in Asia have USDA organic certification because it is expensive to obtain relative to how much tea they export to the US. This is true even of farms that grow tea using biodiverse planting standards that far exceed USDA organic certification standards.

For brewing tea at home, experimentation is the way to go! While vendor guidelines are a good starting point, the same tea could be delicious brewed multiple ways, such as using a lot of leaf, a small amount of water, and a short infusion time, or less leaf more water and a longer infusion time. Darker teas and rolled oolongs are more resistant to heat, whereas for green, white or strip oolongs you'll want water that's somewhere between 170-195F.

The brewing vessel matters too. While there are a lot of single cup steepers in the shape of cute animals or mesh balls, **I personally recommend using a teapot, a wide mesh basket, or even a mug plus strainer combo to allow your leaves maximum space to expand** ([I like this one](#).) When brewing at home you should also feel free to reuse your leaves for a second brew as many premium tea leaves will allow you two or more cups from the same leaves provided you don't wait too long between cups.

Happy sipping!

