

## The French claim to tea

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**THE idea of French tea sounds wrong. Surely they all drink coffee, and tea is something that is grown in the Far East and consumed by the English.**

Not so, say the people in the know. The French, in particular the Mariage Freres company of Paris, are leaders in the luxury, high-culture end of the market.

The Mariage family started importing tea in the 1600s and their company has blending and selling prestige blends since 1854. This was a small volume trade, supplying hotels such as The Ritz and the George V.

The company became seriously famous in the 1980s when Thai student Kitti Cha Sangmanee came on board. His innovations revolutionised the conservative tea world. Sangmanee popularised the concept of flavoured teas with flower petals and herbs. Other companies followed suit and today blends such as arctic fire – black tea with mint and cornflower petals – are enjoyed around the world.

Mariage Freres is quite different from the solid old British companies such as Twinings.

French tea was always a luxury product and under Sangmanee it became the sort of high art that distinguishes French food and wine.

He encouraged drinkers to look for the blackcurrant, hazelnut and muscatel scents from the oils in fine Darjeeling tea.

The product range available at the Mariage stores in Paris and Tokyo is astounding, with more than 500 teas on offer. There are 15 Earl Grey products, including adventurous blends of green tea and bergamot.

For serious addicts, there are tea jellies, tea-scented candles and confectionery, plus restaurants serving dishes such as salmon with green matcha tea.

The tea bags are seriously up-market with the leaves in hand-sewn calico bags and strings attached.

Australian consumers will have to travel if they want the full experience but a selection is available here.

It includes Marco Polo which is China black tea with red fruits and spices which is the company's most popular product worldwide.

Other standouts are Tzar Alexandre, a smoky Russian blend with bergamot, and an orange pekoe which is the longest-leaf variety I have seen.

The Mariage people are quite strict about what you should do with their treasures.

Babak Hadi of Black Pearl Epicure agrees with their guidelines and says the water should be just off the boil – about 90C – when poured into the pot. Long-leaf varieties need about five minutes of steeping and this goes down to two to three minutes for broken tea such as English Breakfast. After brewing the leaves should be immediately taken out of the pot so you can enjoy the subtle fragrances without excessive bitterness from the tannins.

The Mariage coffee table book, *French Tea*, suggests using a teapot with a central strainer that can be lifted out to prevent overbrewing.

If you want to seek out these products, try Superior Fruits, Graceville; Black Pearl Epicure retail store, Fortitude Valley; and Emilia's Pasticceria e Deli Italiana, Gympie.

PERHAPS you find the idea of expensive French tea a little off-putting. The Elmstock company is an Australian-owned family which sources its high-end brews from the same estates as Mariage Freres. Director Hilary White says his family has a long history in the industry.

His great-grandfather Francis Van Reyk started the famous Diyagama plantation in Sri Lanka. Today he sells a "great-grandfather's tea" from the estate which also supplies leaves for Mariage's Ceylan Dimbula Diyagama brand.

Elmstock markets more than 140 teas and supplies many of the cafes and restaurants around Brisbane. Con and Julie Clifford have hosted White at their Queenie's Traditional Tea Houses at Ascot and Nundah. They sell the brand along with British label Taylors of Harrogate and

their own blends.

Con Clifford says Queenie's Royal Classic, which contains three Chinese teas plus blue cornflowers, is one of the most popular items.

He also puts together an "invigorate" herbal mix with peppermint, nettles and lemon grass.

Queenie's serves 60 teas at its tables and has 130 loose-leaf varieties for sale.

One big question about tea is whether to put sugar and milk in the brew.

Julie Clifford says she encourages customers to try the tea straight before adding anything.

This way, some people discover they don't need the additives which were traditionally used to cover up harsh tannins from stewed tea.

Elmstock is widely available around Brisbane and southeast Queensland. In country areas, go to Dalgety's outlets. For more details contact representative Michael Elliott, ph: 3892 6586 or check the website [www.elmstocktea.com.au](http://www.elmstocktea.com.au)

The Queenie's establishments are at 1279 Sandgate Rd, Nundah (ph: 3266 6632) and 134 Racecourse Rd, Ascot (ph: 3268 5151). Try the website: [www.queeniesteahouse.com.au](http://www.queeniesteahouse.com.au).



BREWING ... a good cup of tea has aromatics from the plant oils in the leaves.

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