

# A fine cuppa

SIGNE LANGFORD

Tea sommelier Hoda Paripoush sees very little difference between the art of creating a beautiful perfume or a delicious tea; she believes it's all about the emotion evoked by the aroma.

"Ever since I was a little kid, I collected the empty perfume bottles from my mother, aunts, sister. I've just always loved scents."

As one of 70 tea sommeliers in the country and owner of Sloane Fine Tea Merchants, Paripoush creates unique tea blends for her online and pop-up shops, retail customers and 130 cafés and restaurants, including Toronto's acclaimed Canoe. Of the more than 30 blends she's developed, some teas are bespoke – made just for one person, shop or restaurant – some are seasonal and others are perennially available customer favourites.

By working with either the chef or wine sommelier of a restaurant, Paripoush establishes the emotion they wish to evoke in the patron, and then, with her choice of teas and aromatics, she creates a fragrant blend that she hopes will do just that.

Canada is leading the way in the world of professional tea appreciation. In 2006, George Brown College in partnership with the Tea Association of Canada launched the Certified Tea Sommelier program – the first in the world.

The program is now offered at seven colleges across Canada, where students learn the art of brewing, blending, food matching, blind tea tasting and cupping, becoming experts who should be able to taste the terroir of Darjeeling and tell the



**Certified tea sommelier Jennifer Commins tastes her own blends.**

SIGNE LANGFORD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

difference between an oolong and assam with their eyes closed.

A talented tea taster can detect the most subtle of aromas and nuances of flavour that most of us might not notice; for most tea drinkers it comes down to liking or disliking a cuppa.

Words like smoky, chocolatey, toasty, grassy, floral, tannic – many borrowed from the world of wine – are what inform a tea sommelier's food and tea pairings.

And just like pairing wine with food, it's all about balancing the bitterness of the drinks'

tannins – yes, tea leaves, like grapes, are loaded with tannins – with the sweet or savoury notes of the dish.

Jennifer Commins, of Pluck Teas, finds the best tea and food marriages are complementary, balanced and don't fight for dominance. Commins, who always arrives to tastings "famished" – she believes it heightens her sense of taste and smell – likes to combine natural and local ingredients such as Prince Edward County lavender, cocoa from Toronto's ChocoSol, and the Fairmont Royal York's rooftop honey to fine, Indian and Asian teas.

Her clients include some of Toronto's top establishments: Nota Bene, Gilead Café and Soho House.

At Toronto's Shangri-La Hotel, the dessert menu lists a suggested Pluck Teas pairing for each of pastry chef Kate Siegel's elegant sweets. Commins created her Vanilla Rose Tartan tea exclusively for the hotel with high-grown, Sri Lankan black tea, Tuscan rose petals and African vanilla beans.

She paired it with Siegel's poached cherries with chocolate sponge and beet cherry sorbet. For Siegel's complex, exotic dessert of warm plums with yuzu ice cream and green-tea cake, Commins recommended her Star Anise Chai.

"The creaminess of the ice cream balances the tannins in the black tea, while the star anise adds a spice note to the tea that accentuates beautifully the citrus and stone fruit in the dessert," she says.

"The spice with the fruit reminds me of a sweet Indian chutney."

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## A FINE BLEND

Don't eat that – it might be all wrong with your oolong! Certified tea sommelier Jennifer Commins serves up three perfect food-and-tea pairings.

» Chilled English Breakfast paired with baked brie, spiced nuts and stone-fruit compote served with warm crusty baguette. "The creamy cheese melds perfectly with black tea; it's all about taming those tannins! Peaches and apricots are lovely layered over the deep malty base note of English Breakfast."

» Hot Vintage Coco Pu-Erh paired with premium vanilla ice cream and bananas brûlée. "The chocolate in this fermented, cellar-aged tea marry beautifully with the banana, burnt sugar, and ice cream. The creaminess of the dish tames the tannins and peaty flavours of the Pu-Erh, which can be challenging to the uninitiated."

» Chilled Star Anise Chai blended half-and-half with lemonade, served with duck confit. "The star anise references Peking duck, one of my favourite dishes, and the lemon cuts some of the richness."

Signe Langford