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Photos by Kevin Prieto

by Annissa Anderson, for The Bulletin Special Projects

Tea grew wild in its native China until it was discovered that the brewed leaves improved the taste of the water the Chinese boiled in order to prevent becoming ill. Since its cultivation began – about 4,000 years ago — tea has also been used to improve our health in other ways. Today, we enjoy a world of varieties of tea for both flavor and health benefits.

True Tea

The five basic types of true tea — white, black, green, oolong and pu-erh — come from the *Camellia sinensis* plant. While many people have tasted only a couple of varieties, the flavors of different teas are worth delving into. From nutty to flowery and astringent to buttery and everywhere in between, teas offer a nearly infinite spectrum of aromas and flavors. These differences result from how they are grown, harvested and processed.

Though all types of true tea are available in the United States, the most commonly consumed are black and green teas. Black tea is made with leaves that have been fermented before being heated and dried. It has the highest caffeine content and forms the basis for some well-known teas like Darjeeling, English Breakfast and Lapsang Souchong. Green tea, with a lesser but still considerable amount of caffeine, is produced from leaves that are steamed and dried but not fermented.

In Central Oregon, we enjoy a world of varieties of tea for both flavor and health benefits.

Much research on these two types has confirmed that both black and green teas increase the body's antioxidant activity up to about 45 percent. With regular consumption — several cups a day — these unique antioxidants, called flavonoids, can help to prevent certain cancers, reduce the risk of heart disease and diabetes, encourage weight loss, lower cholesterol, and increase mental alertness.

Since consistent consumption is the key to maximizing tea's health properties, Lori Brizee, MS, RD, LD with Central Oregon Nutrition Consultants, advises choosing a decaffeinated

tea for drinking throughout the day.

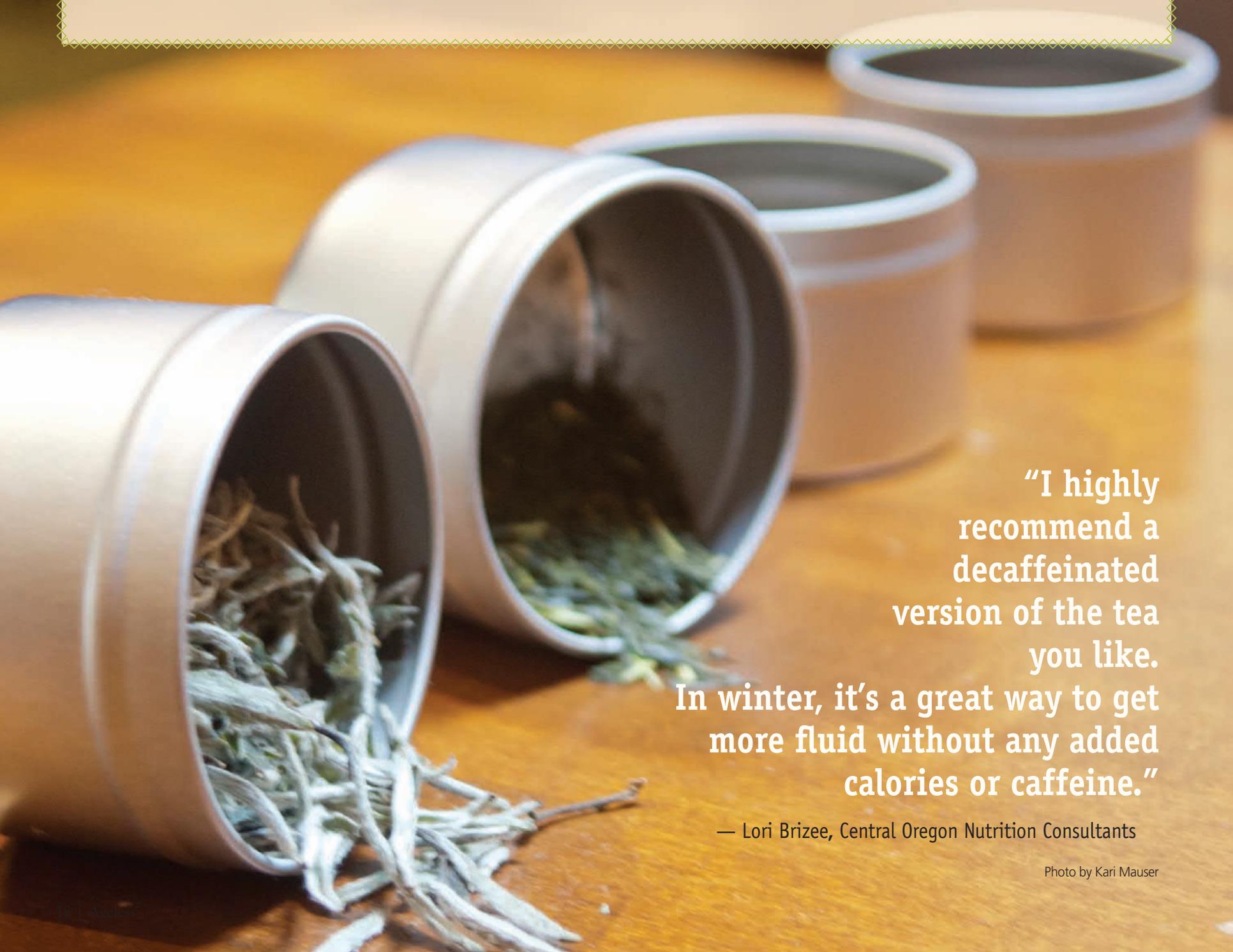
"I highly recommend a decaffeinated version of the tea you like," said Brizee. "In winter, it's a great way to get more fluid without any added calories or caffeine."

Herbal Tea

Herbal teas, or tisanes, are prepared like true tea but contain no true tea leaves. Instead, herbal teas come from the flowers, berries, peels, seeds, leaves, and roots of many different plants. These teas, though mostly possessing lower concentrations of antioxidants, have a

myriad of other health benefits, depending on the herbs they contain. Herbal teas are also naturally decaffeinated.

Many herbal teas, if used properly, can be natural healing agents to combat existing health problems as well as for preventative care. Drinking herbal teas with properties known to improve certain health conditions is a great way to take an active role in your health, said Dr. Laurie Grisez, N.D. with Blue Star Naturopathic Clinic in Bend. Dr. Grisez prescribes herbal teas — in addition to other treatment — to provide immune support, digestive and circulative aid,



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and bone support, among others.

For overall immune support and prevention, Dr. Grisez suggests teas made from rose hips — a rich source of vitamin C — or elderberry, a good source of vitamins A and C. To help digestion, Dr. Grisez recommends teas made from ginger, fennel and chamomile.

“Warming and stimulating, ginger stimulates your own body’s digestive enzymes,” said Dr. Grisez.

These same properties also make ginger an excellent herb for helping to increase circulation, she said.

For osteoporosis or other bone support issues, Dr. Grisez recommends tea made from nutrient-rich herbs like horsetail — a major source of silica, which encourages the absorption and use of calcium by the body — as well as nettles, dandelion, raspberry and oat straw. Many of these nutrient-rich herbs are found in other herbal tea blends as well.



Photos by Kevin Prieto

“There is a lot of overlap with medicinal herbs. You can improve several health factors with one tea,” said Dr. Grisez.

However, she said, it is important to consult your M.D. or naturopathic physician before beginning regular consumption of medicinal tea. This applies especially to those with chronic health conditions or anyone taking other medications, as herb and drug interactions exist.

Brewing Tea

The majority of Americans brew tea the same way, by plunking a tea bag or ball of loose tea leaves into a cup or pot of boiled water and

steeping just until the temperature lowers to the point where their lips will not burn upon touching the liquid. But tea aficionados know that brewing tea correctly is dependent on the variety of tea itself.

When brewing black teas, it is good to know that the tea leaves are fully oxidized (they are bruised to give them more exposure to air), making for assertive flavors and aromas. For this reason, black teas need only steep in near-boiling water for two to four minutes. Green and white teas need less time to steep — just one to two minutes — in slightly cooler (just steaming) water. Oolong teas have specific requirements based on

the variety; best to buy oolongs that come with brewing instructions.

Most packaged herbal teas — made from flowers and leaves — can be steeped (infused) like true teas, but require a longer steeping time, up to 10 to 15 minutes. But some herbal teas, made from harder plant parts such as barks, roots and seeds, require a decoction, which takes more time and heat for extracting the plant constituents. A decoction requires simmering the plant part for 15 to 25 minutes in a covered pan after the water comes to a boil. The decocted tea is then steeped for an additional ten minutes before being strained and ready to drink.



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