

Medicinal Teas of the East and West During the Medieval Period

By Heather Daveno, 1984
Contact: thedaveno@gmail.com
AugustPhoenixHats.com

This article compares a selection of herbs which were used as medicinal teas in both Western Europe and Asia during the medieval period. I have included personal notes regarding color, smell and taste comparisons on those herbs which were available to me at the time that I wrote this article in 1985.

CAUTION: *This article is not intended as medical advice. Please consult your doctor before trying these teas if you are pregnant or have significant health issues, or if you are taking medication that may react to any these herbs, singularly or in combination.*

According to Chinese legend, tea was discovered by Emperor Shen Nung in about the year 273 BCE. Shen Nung believed that people who boiled their drinking water remained healthier than those who did not. One day, while the Emperor's water was boiling, a breeze blew some leaves from a nearby camellia tree into the pot. Shen Nung found that the leaves added taste and aroma to his boiling water. He later found that he was more alert during his contemplations whenever he drank the water from the boiled leaves. From that discovery, tea became an integral part of Chinese culture.



Fenugreek, also known as Bird's Foot, is one of the oldest of the medicinal herbs. Introduced to Europe by Benedictine monks, it was promoted by Charlemagne in the 9th century, and cultivated in England by the 10th century. It was used in Europe to treat colds and fever, and was considered by some to be an aphrodisiac.

In China it was known as Hi-la-pa, where it was introduced from the West during the T'ang Dynasty (7th-9th centuries CE). It has been used as a medicinal since that time. Chinese herbalists treat bladder infections with 3-4 cups of Fenugreek tea per day while symptoms are present.

Prepare Fenugreek tea by infusing the leaves in boiling water. A decoction can be made by boiling 1 tsp. of the seeds in 1 cup of water until they are tender (about 5 minutes). Cover and steep the seeds for an additional 15 minutes. Tea made from the seeds has a rich, saffron color.

CAUTION: *Do not exceed recommended dose. Large, prolonged doses may cause damage to the nervous system.*

The seeds themselves are somewhat bitter and impart this bitterness to the tea, although I found that a bit of honey prevented the tea from leaving a bitter aftertaste. One cup of Fenugreek tea three times a day will relieve stomach gas. Unstrained tea with lemon juice and honey will soothe and nourish a sick body and may be helpful in reducing fever. Eating the seeds along with the tea will give you an extra nutritional boost.

Mugwort is regarded as one of the ancient magical plants. Respected throughout medieval Europe and Asia, it was known as “Mother of Herbs”. Mugwort was thought to dissolve gallstones and regulate the menses. It was also valued for the treatment of epileptic fits and fevers. In the Middle Ages, it was called St. John’s Plant because John the Baptist was believed to have worn a belt of it in the wilderness. This legend may have brought travelers to believe that wearing a sprig of the herb would protect them from fatigue, wild beasts and evil spirits. Mugwort was also a favorite beverage in England before the introduction of Chinese tea.

In China, it was called Aiye, and was gathered at the Dragon Boat Festival (on the 5th day of the 5th moon) to be hung on the front doors of homes as a charm against evil influences. Mugwort has been employed extensively in Chinese medicine. Two tablespoons of the tea was prescribed 3-4 times a day as a tonic and calmative. Mugwort tea was considered a brain tonic and was thought to be helpful in treating sleepwalking. It was also used to relieve pain and to stop bleeding.

Prepare Mugwort tea by infusing 1 ounce of leaves and flower tops in 1 pint of boiling water. It is said to have a tangy taste, though I cannot verify this firsthand.

CAUTION: *Drinking more than 1 – 2 cups of Mugwort tea a day can lead to symptoms of poisoning.*



Sweet Flag is another herb that was thought to be an ancient magical plant. It is also known as sedge, sweet myrtle and calamus. It is thought that the Mongolians introduced Sweet Flag to Russia in the 10th century, and brought it to Poland two centuries later. It was used in England in the 16th century as an aromatic stimulant, to increase the appetite and to aid digestion.

The Cantonese called this herb Shui-ch’ang-p’u, and hung it on the doors of their homes on the New Year to destroy evil influences. It was also used in China to treat heartburn.

Prepare Sweet Flag tea by infusing 1 ounce of powdered root in 10 ounces of boiling water. Take 2 ounce doses, 2-3 times

a day.



Rosemary in European legend relates that when the Virgin Mary hung her cloak over a bush of white blossoms, they turned blue in remembrance, hence the folk name of “Mary’s Mantle.” In the Middle Ages, rosemary was one of the herbs which was used to ward off the bubonic plague. The tea was drunk in the 16th century to prevent diseases from entering the body. It was thought to stimulate the heart and act as a restorative and diuretic. A tea of rosemary, sage and lavender was used to treat colds, headaches and hysterical depression.

It was brought to China from Rome during the Wei Dynasty (3rd century BCE) where it was called Mi-tieh-hsiang. The tea was prepared with a pinch of ginger, and was drunk in 1 cup doses, 3-4 times a day as an appetite restorative.

To prepare Rosemary for the treatment of nervous headache, infuse 1/2 teaspoon each of Rosemary, Sage and Peppermint in 1 cup of water. Cover and steep for 5 minutes, strain and drink a cup every 1-2 hours.

CAUTION: Excessive use of Rosemary can cause abortions and convulsions.

I found that Rosemary tea by itself was nearly colorless, very aromatic with a hint of pine to the taste. Both leaves and flowers can be infused for tea, the leaves will make a stronger brew.



Ginseng has been steeped in mystery and superstition for several centuries. In Europe it was known as Tartar Root, Ninsin, Seng and Red Berry. It was thought to be a memory aid and stimulant by most, and an aphrodisiac by a few. A cup of ginseng tea was taken before meals as a tonic and stimulant for digestive problems caused by mental and nervous exhaustion. A 1/2-ounce piece of root boiled in tea each morning was also thought to remedy consumption.

The Chinese called it Jenschin, which means “man root” because of its shape. It has been used as a tonic and heal-all in China since 3,000 BCE. Ginseng was thought to be useful in the treatment of male impotence because it increased hormone production in the endocrine gland, which restored healthy function in a slow and gradual way, rather than acting as the stimulant and aphrodisiac that Westerners claimed.

It is still used to treat fatigue, nervous disorders and the complaints of old age. A small amount of the powdered root added to other herbal teas may decrease symptoms of hay fever and similar allergies. Ginseng tea may also help to regulate temperature imbalances due to hot weather or menopause.

Ginseng tea tastes acrid like parsnip and impressed me as being an acquired taste. It is somewhat more palatable when sweetened.

Prepare Ginseng tea by boiling a whole root in 1 quart of water in a closed, non-metal double boiler for 2 – 3 hours. Strain and drink immediately. There is also a powdered root available which may be the “instant tea” version.

CAUTION: *Large doses of Ginseng may cause depression, insomnia and nervous disorders. People with high blood pressure should not use Ginseng by itself to treat colds. Do not blend Ginseng with herbs containing iron, do not blend with Indian or China Black teas.*



Ginger was imported by the Spanish from Jamaica in the mid-16th century. It is native to Asia, and is among the top-ranking botanicals in China, where it is known as Chiang.

A pinch of powdered ginger added to other teas is said to relieve nausea. One or two cups of hot ginger tea is thought to be good for an upset stomach caused by hangover. A cup of ginger tea 3-4 times a day is also used to relieve menstrual cramps and discomfort, (although I remember this tea making matters worse when my grandmother made me drink it).

I found a couple of recipes for ginger tea:

One ounce of the powdered root, stirred into 1 pint of boiling water, taken in a dose of 2-3 tablespoons 3 times a day, is claimed to remedy loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting.

A cold remedy tea can be prepared by putting 1/2 teaspoon powdered Ginger, a handful of dried mint leaves and a handful of dried strawberry leaves into a porcelain teapot and steeping for 10 minutes.

I did like the ginger/mint/strawberry leaf tea and found it helpful in chasing away the chills.



Garlic has been referenced in several English herbals from the 10th-15th centuries and has been cultivated in England since at least 1540. Field laborers in 12th century Europe used wild garlic to combat heat exhaustion. Drinking tea made from the bruised bulbs before and after meals was also thought to be useful in the treatment of epilepsy.

According to legend, Sasuan was discovered in ancient China by Emperor Huang-ti. While on a mountain climbing expedition, some of the emperor's companions ate the leaves of a poisonous plant. Huang-ti forced them to eat the wild Garlic that was growing nearby and saved their lives. It became a cultivated plant shortly after that. Garlic was used

to treat hypertension and high blood pressure, except in those cases where it was caused by kidney disease.

Prepare Garlic tea by infusing 2 – 4 freshly chopped cloves in 1 quart of boiling water. If you are treating a bad cold, drink 1 cup every hour, or 1 cup 3-4 times a day if your cold is less severe.



Sage has been cultivated for centuries in England, France and Germany. It was administered for fevers and was believed to calm nerves, alleviate headaches and sooth a sore throat. Sage tea was also thought to slow the aging process and enhance memory.

To the Chinese, Shu-wei-ts'ao was an ancient symbol of wisdom. It was so revered that they would give Dutch traders 2-3 times the weight in China Black Tea for the pungent herb. It was highly valued as a stimulant tonic for stomach and nervous disorders, and for the treatment of typhoid fever and lung hemorrhage.

As a result of this research, sage tea has become one of my favorite winter teas, with its smoky aroma, deep green color and a body similar to nettle.

Infuse the leaves and tops in boiling water and steep in a closed pot for 10 minutes and strain. To treat a sore throat and mild laryngitis, infuse 2 ounces of sage in 1 quart of boiling water, cover and let stand for 2 hours. Strain, add 1 tablespoon honey and 1 tablespoon vinegar, and use as a gargle. I have tried this and found it to be fairly effective in soothing "performer's throat".

As a kidney tonic, infuse 1/2 ounce of Sage and 1/2 ounce of peppermint in 1 pint of boiling water. Let stand until cold and drink 1 cup 2-3 times a day.

Sage tea with a bruised clove of garlic and a pinch of powdered ginseng is said to relieve depression. The fumes from Sage tea are said to clear the nasal passages, although I have not found this to be a noticeable effect.

I wrote this treatise in 1984 for the medieval reenactment community. It was first published in 'A Watched Pot' Spring 1985, a culinary journal published quarterly in the Pacific NW. This article has been amended from its original.

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