

In search of the perfect cuppa

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When fellow *Star* columnist Rita Zekas asks me for a favour, I do it.

First, she's bigger than I am. Second, she's my dear friend. Third, I had a hunch the request in question – that I pick up a batch of her favourite tea bags on my recent trip to the U.K. – might be a column. Here it is.

I'd been savouring London's art scene with my culture-vulture mother (e.g. the Velasquez exhibit at the National Gallery and classical music at the Barbican), investigating eel, pie and mash shops (in the name of historical research and not recommended as a culinary high), sleuthing the Melton Mowbray pie at its source (watch this space for more) and sitting in the local pub celebrity-spotting while I sipped half a pint of bitter. I was too busy, in fact, to get to the spectacular Marks & Spencer food outlet in Camden Town – the Holy Grail for my tea bag pilgrimage – until the last day of my visit. However, it turned out to be fruitful, fun and the perfect excuse to stop by the kebab/fish and chips shop adjacent to the Camden Town tube station for a final fix of the finest chips I've found.

Scanning the tea section in M & S for packages marked Fair Trade Extra Strong Tea Bags, I began chatting with a friendly sales clerk who was stacking shelves.

Hearing about my mission, she was eager to offer this: "We get loads of people coming in to buy those tea bags for friends and relatives who live abroad," she said, adding helpful advice about taking the pouches out of their cardboard package and stuffing them among the contents of a suitcase for easier transportation.

It was my mother, a scientist and keen foodie, who mused about Rita's dire need for these tea bags and came up with the suggestion that two regular bags might work just as well as one extra-strong. In other words, why all the fuss?

Back in Canada, I called my friend to arrange tea bag delivery and raised this question.

Having discovered some years ago that coffee beans were triggering an allergy that inflamed her eyes, Rita experimented with tea bags for her morning caffeine fix.

"I tried everything," she insists. "Double-bagging it, steeping, even putting them on my eyes." Using two tea bags made the tea "too bitter, too harsh, too much."

When a tea-drinking Brit introduced her to the Marks & Sparks extra strong cuppa, she had an epiphany. "It was like wowza-wowza. A whole burst of flavour with a softness."

At that time, there was a Marks & Spencer store in Toronto's Manulife Centre. Rita stocked up and quickly became hooked.

"I have a support group who are also addicted," she explains, adding, "They curse me for introducing them to it."

She leaves bags with friends she visits, citing "Dallas, Tuscany, New York and Florida." But there's a risk: "Unfortunately, other people use them."

Alan Ledsham is a food buyer for Marks & Spencer specializing in tea. I spoke to him by phone from his London office.

He notes that most tea companies in the U.K. make something akin to his company's extra-strong rendition: black tea that's a 50/50 mixture of Kenyan and Assam.

It's one of three types of M & S tea that include a standard version and the priciest Gold Blend. Extra-strong is extremely popular for its rounded flavour produced by high-quality Kenyan leaves combined with the strong, smoky taste of Assam.

As for using two tea bags as a substitute, he agrees with Rita.

"If you have poor quality tea, it doesn't matter how many bags you use."

I ask about the perfect cup of tea. Ledsham insists that fresh water is key. "You mustn't reuse boiled water. It has to be fresh water – tap is fine – each time."

He likes a copper kettle. "It's a brilliant conductor that heats the water gently from all sides."

Heating the teapot or cup first with hot water is a good idea.

Steeping for 4 minutes, then stirring the tea, is de rigueur.

He adds milk to his cup before the tea, a controversial topic for a future column.

And here's great news. Although M & S tea is only available at their stores, it's produced by a 100-year-old company in Newcastle called Ringtons that sells Extra Fresh tea bags (Ringtons' name for extra-strong) via the website ringtons.co.uk.

Ringtons tea bags are winging their way to me, so I haven't tried them yet, but could this solve Rita's tea dilemma?

Again, watch this space.

Fruit and Nut Biscotti

This recipe from my friend Nancy makes a crunchy cookie with the chewiness of dried fruit and nuts that's great with tea.

1/2 cup golden raisins
2/3 cup dried cranberries
2/3 cup coarsely chopped dried apricots
1/4 cup sherry
3 eggs, separated
1-1/4 cups granulated sugar
1/2 cup butter, melted, cooled
2 tsp vanilla extract
3 cups all-purpose flour
3/4 tsp baking powder
1/2 cup pistachios or almonds, coarsely chopped
1/2 cup walnuts or pecans, coarsely chopped

Preheat oven to 350F.

In small bowl, combine raisins, cranberries, apricots and sherry. Let sit about 30 minutes, stirring once or twice.

In large bowl, beat egg yolks with half of sugar until smooth.

In another bowl, whisk egg whites with remaining sugar until soft peaks form.

Fold into egg yolk mixture.

Add melted butter and vanilla to another bowl; stir to combine. Fold in several spoonfuls of egg white mixture. Add to egg yolk mixture in large bowl.

Add flour and baking powder to another bowl; stir to combine. Add to batter in large bowl; stir to combine. Add dried fruit/sherry mixture; stir to combine. Add pistachios and walnuts; stir to combine.

Divide dough into three. On floured surface, shape into rectangular logs a little more than 1 inch/2.5 cm thick and about 3 inches/8 cm wide. Transfer to parchment-lined cookie sheet. Bake about 30 minutes or until firm and lightly browned. (Leave oven on.)

Cool on wire rack on cookie sheet about 5 minutes. Carefully transfer each log to cutting board. Slice on diagonal into 3/4-inch/2-cm wide slices. Return to cookie sheet, leaving space around each slice. Bake 10 to 12 minutes or until browned and crisp.

Cool completely on wire rack.

Makes about 3 dozen.

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