

Looking for a cup of tea made with as much care as your oat milk latte? Here are 6 places to start.

By [Anying Guo](#)

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Tea has become the forgotten child of the caffeinated-beverage world, the Miss America first runner-up to coffee. It often doesn't receive the same careful treatment that coffee does in shops or cafes; tea, if it's even on the menu, usually comes in a nondescript compact bag, while employees can wax poetic about the exact sourcing of the beans they have.

Nothing against the ingenuity and convenience of a tea bag, but loose-leaf tea highlights the taste, smell and experience of the beverage. I grew up drinking loose-leaf tea because that was the way the flavor was supposed to travel through the water, my mother told me. (At restaurants she would order just hot water to avoid drinking bagged tea altogether.)

But there are places in the D.C. area where tea isn't an afterthought. At these six spots, the owners and staff are just as committed as their coffee counterparts, and offer myriad loose-leaf options, from complex herbal mixes to handpicked green tea. When I asked for recommendations, employees would unfailingly ask what I was in the mood for — More or less caffeine? Green or black? — to steer me in the right direction.

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Calabash Tea and Tonic

“How can we help you heal today?” is the first greeting you’ll hear from the barista behind the bar at Calabash Tea and Tonic. The question stops you in your tracks and forces you to wonder: What *do* I need from my tea today?

No pressure, though. Calabash, which was started by herbalist Sunyatta Amen and has outposts in Shaw and Brookland, focuses on the healing properties tea can provide.

“[Calabash wants] to help people heal themselves with ancient methods in modern times,” says Ali Hanif-Allah, a shift manager at the Shaw location.

The beverages are often aptly named for their purpose. “My Last Good Nerve,” for instance, has ingredients to help soothe a frazzled mind: organic lavender, chamomile, St. John’s wort. It’s a popular choice, says Hanif-Allah; he once made five of them in a row.

“It’s really just wanting the best for the person in front of you,” says Amen, who encourages employees to engage with and observe customers to guide them to an option they may not have considered before on the funky, schoolroom-size chalkboard.

Both Amen and Hanif-Allah have seen people walk through the door skeptical, and leave calmed and perhaps a true believer. It doesn’t hurt that baristas write personalized phrases of encouragement (“Love is sacred”; “Love is passion”) on the caps of to-go cups.

If you go, try: Love Potion #10 Chai, which Amen describes as “an overall tonic,” based on her grandmother’s original chai and contains 20 spices and various herbs.

1847 Seventh St. NW, open Tuesday through Sunday; 2701 12th St. NE, open Wednesday through Sunday.
calabashdc.com.

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Tynan Coffee and Tea

Tynan's low-key storefront and muted-blue sign in Columbia Heights are easy to miss, especially next to the bright corporate coloring of the neighboring Wawa. The shop has a wide array of unexpected tea blends, such as Pomelo Basil (a black tea) and Watermelon Mint (an herbal tea), sourced from Chicago.

"Tea comprises 40 percent of the menu," owner John T. Richardson says. "So, 40 percent of employees' training is dedicated to learning about tea."

You won't find the tea options scrawled on the chalkboards above your head. Instead, the leaves are outfitted in test tubes in front of the register, laid out from least to most caffeinated, and look more fit for a science class than a cafe. Richardson says the test tubes are meant to make the presentation of the tea more approachable and allow guests to interact with the different aromas and blends before they choose one.

Tea is served in a clear mug with a cylindrical strainer and a small hourglass that keeps the prescribed brewing time. Cleverly, the strainer comes with a lid that you can set it on after the brewing time (which can be as long as seven minutes, like for the herbal blend Tuscany Lavender) is up. It feels like you're partaking in a delectable chemistry experiment.

If you go, try: Blue Cantaloupe, a green tea with apple pieces, purple dragon fruit cubes, lemon peel and more, and that went through years of flavor testing.

1400 Irving St. NW. #107. Open daily. tynancoffeeandtea.com.

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Ching Ching Cha

When Ching Ching Cha owner Hollie Wong opened this Georgetown staple 22 years ago, the District did not have a coffee shop on every corner, much less a teahouse. Fast forward a couple decades, and Ching Ching Cha remains one of the most distinctive places to drink tea in the city.

Wong wanted to bring her Chinese heritage to the center of the shop and diversify the perception of Chinese tea. Ching Ching Cha boasts an extensive menu, the pages divided up by oolong, green, black and pu-erh teas, with traditional Chinese options such as Ti Kwan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) alongside more familiar ones like Dragon Well. There's also a small selection of food, including dumplings and sweets.

The knowledgeable staff talks customers through the way their tea is brewed, from the pot it's served in to the combination of ingredients, often letting customers sniff the wet tea leaves. It's an intimate process meant to simultaneously educate and offer the experience of afternoon tea. But you can also just get a cup to go.

Wong finds that people see afternoon tea as something to be reserved for a special event, but Ching Ching Cha counters that it can be a daily production. "We have tea all the time, any time of day," she says.

If you go, try: One of the oolong teas, which come with a wooden tray, clay pot, a pouring cup and small cup to sip from, for both the fascinating brewing process and the serene taste.

1063 Wisconsin Ave. NW. Open Thursday through Monday. chingchingcha.com.

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Eerkin's Uyghur Cuisine and Tea Bar

There is quite literally a “tea bar” located on the second floor of this Glover Park restaurant, with jars of tea lining the shelves along one wall. More than 50 types of tea are offered, including white, herbal, black and rooibos.

Descriptions accompany every tea on the menu, letting you know the ingredients, health effects and historical background. Some are mixed in house, and all are served in French presses, solving the eternal issue of accidentally ingesting stray leaves, and making teas easier to share and drink among friends.

The Eerkin's Special Tea can be sold by the jar and is mixed by the shop, and the wide-reaching selection means there's a type of tea to accompany any meal or be served solo. Try one of the special tea mixes, which include blends such as Strawberry Rose Champagne, Lavender Lemongrass and Orange Spiced Chai.

If you go, try: Pink Tea, which contains milk that's been boiled with green tea leaves and saffron strands, and has a soft pink color and fragrant aftertaste.

2412 Wisconsin Ave. NW; 4008 University Dr., Fairfax; 1701 Rockville Pike # B1, Rockville. Open daily. eerkins.com.

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Grace Street Coffee

Tucked away in Georgetown, in a space shared with Sundovich and South Block, is Grace Street Coffee, which, contrary to its name, also offers black, green, oolong and herbal tea, as well as a seasonal selection (right now, it's chamomile flowers).

Partner and general manager Aaron Agre had worked in shops where "tea was more of an afterthought," so it was important to him that Grace Street took the opposite approach. He says the staff taste-tested the tea at a variety of water temperatures and steep times to ensure each offering would be brewed properly and efficiently.

When you order a cup of tea, you can watch as it's measured out and showcased in clear glassware, right at the bar, accompanied by a tiny timer. That timer is crucial for the standout green tea, which often has notes of bitterness that are exposed when it's overbrewed.

If you go, try: Jasmine Pearls iced, a green tea that comes in a rolled pearl form, for an added palpable kick of jasmine blossoms.

3210 Grace St. NW. Open daily. gracestcoffee.com.

Valley Brook Tea

When you walk into Valley Brook Tea in Dupont Circle, it's like the Starbucks that formerly resided on the corner of P Street and 21st Street never existed. The two-story space looks like a hybrid of modern coffee shop sensibilities and traditional Chinese flair.

"I've been waiting too long to open a shop like this," says owner Yunhan Zhang, who used to work in finance before leaving to be a tea wholeseller.

Zhang wants to elevate the knowledge people have of tea and dispel long-held myths, including the notion that all tea must be steeped for three to five minutes (he says that should only be for green and white tea). Zhang says he hopes to

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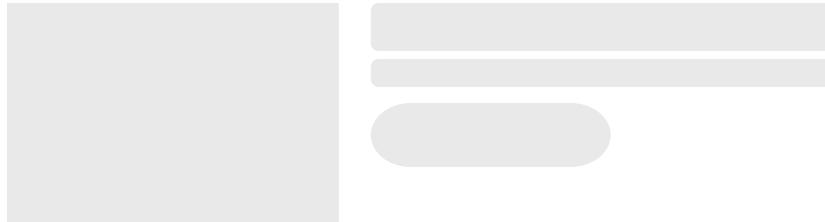
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green and oolong teas, and even the shop's teaware, were made.

"I want people to visualize where their tea comes from as they do homework," he says, adding that the photographs of the tea farms lining the wall are of their own fields.

If you go, try: Dragon Beard, a type of black tea with a sweet aftertaste that uses the tender buds instead of the leaves of the tea plant.

2101 P St. NW. Open daily. valleybrooktea.com.



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