Many customers ask about the differences between a Breakfast Blend and an Afternoon blend, and are curious how we go about creating new blends as well.

Breakfast tea blends tend to contain teas that produce a cup strong and robust enough to “get the body moving” in the morning, allowing you to start your day with a kick. Conversely, afternoon tea blends are designed to be lighter in character and tend to be smoother on the palate, creating the perfect feel for a day winding down.

There are no specific rules or formulas about what specific teas go into blends of tea. Most blends can differ slightly in taste and appearance from vendor to vendor and from country to country. This is oftentimes due to the ratio of each component used during the blending process.

English Breakfast is a tea blend, which is traditionally designed to accompany hearty breakfast foods, common in the British household. This blend tends to include strong, robust varieties of tea, which create a full, rich flavor when blended. In the U.S., English Breakfast tea blends chiefly use a large China Keemun leaf for the main blending component. This full-bodied tea from China is then blended with tea leaves from Kenya to achieve a deeper flavor and darker cup appearance. English Breakfast blends may also include a brisk tasting Sri Lankan tea to achieve a nice cup that helps get you going each morning.

Irish Breakfast is another popular and widely recognized tea blend comprised of full bodied black teas. The tea is heavily consumed in Ireland, which explains the name, and is chiefly comprised of malty-flavored teas sourced from the Assam region of India. Many Irish Breakfast blends can contain other black teas, including Darjeeling, to balance the intense flavors that are characteristic of Assam teas. When brewed, the tea is generally a very dark red to brown in color, with a brisk flavor and an undertone of dark, richly fermented malt. Due to its strength, Irish Breakfast tea is commonly served with milk, but some prefer to drink it with lemon or sugar, or simply straight.

Scottish Breakfast follows the lines of the more popular English and Irish Breakfast blends; a strong tea with a robust flavor. It tends to vary slightly from these other blends in composition by including malty Assam teas, brisk teas from Sri Lanka and the smoother Keemun teas from China.

Afternoon tea blends are typically designed to be light and smooth in character. The base of these blends can be created from the traditionally “easy drinking teas” error to ensure the right balance of flavor.

At Mark T. Wendell Tea Company and at Grace Tea Company, we have several “tried and true” blends that have been some of our best sellers over time. Once we find a winner, we are meticulous at keeping our formulas consistent over time to ensure that once we find that perfect cup, we continue to deliver it to our customers. Our employees and even our significant others at home go through many rounds of tasting before we get to that cup! I recently created several new tea blends. When I began the creation process, I had to look past the attributes of the individual leaf to determine how some of our tea selections would be best suited in combination with each other. For example, a malty Assam tea combined with a bright Ceylon tea will blend into a robust tea that has a sharp color and strong body. While bringing these new blends to market was a lot of work, it was also a fun, educational and creative process.

If you want to embark down the path of...
combining teas, develop a vision about what you want your end result to look like. Are you trying to make a strong tea, an easy drinking tea or a tea with spice or fruit notes? Once you have determined the direction of your blending project, you can begin experimenting with brewing your tea creations in anticipation of the final tasty results.

After your ideas about your tea blend have been established, it is a good idea to lay out the teas that you wish to blend and start combining, creating ratios and then steeping. I recommend dropping a spoonful of each component tea into a cup in the amount that you think would be most desired. When making a few sample blends, make sure to jot down your notes for review when you cup the brew. It is important to combine teas that have similar steeping times so that each tea component will reach its full potential. For example, the combination of a highly oxidized black tea with a delicate green tea will produce a less than desirable cup of tea! Another important factor that comes into play is the overall leaf size. If you combine two or three distinctly differing leaf grades, then the end results may not be very appealing. In these cases, the larger leaves will float above the smaller ones, separating significantly.

When you achieve a desired blend, it is best to let it sit for a day or so. This will allow the aromas from the different leaves to intermix for a desirable amount of time. After this time frame, if the blend still tastes great, it would be best to blend a small amount no larger than a quarter of a pound. If this still tastes similar to your initial cup, then you can begin making larger batches.

One of my recent visions yielded a blend which I recently launched, Manhattan Tribute Blend. I am extremely delighted with the outcome (needless to say, it went through many iterations before I officially launched it!). This tea blend is the perfect combination of Indian, Formosan and Ceylon teas, devised for late day and after dinner consumption when the palate is satiated. When brewed, it produces a bold cup with a slightly floral note. Differing from other blends that we currently produce, it was the perfect addition to our offerings. I created this blend in honor of a dear family member who lived his life in Manhattan and lost a battle to cancer last year, and therefore named it in his honor, and as a tribute, donate a portion of the sales from this tea to cancer charities.

In order to keep our product fresh, we generally create about 100 lbs. of most blends per week. When those outside of the tea industry visit our facility, they are oftentimes amazed at the simplicity of the process. We use industrial mixers that are designed to churn the contents for several minutes per cycle, to ensure contents are uniformly blended. Once the teas are properly turned over and mixed together, they can then be stored in large air-tight containers until packaged for the consumer.

After dialoguing with several other blenders, both large and small, I learned that other specialty tea vendors utilize this straightforward technology as well. One of the newest dry material uniform mixers on the market today is the Continental Products Corporation’s Rollo Mixer, which has received numerous high rankings from within the tea industry; it comes in varying sizes and is reported to blend uniformly. The real advance in this product is in cleanout, product access and seal technology. The development of this type of blending equipment geared towards the specialty tea industry’s specific blending needs has yielded a modern twist to an age-old process.

Indeed the size and some features of the blending equipment may vary, but the overall result of the mechanical process yields the same end result. Generally speaking, the hardest part of blending tea is figuring out what teas will work well together, which teas do not, and as a tea blender, trying to establish an objective trust in your palate. But once you find the recipe for a perfect cup of tea, make sure you hold onto it, your customers will thank you for it.

About Mark T. Wendell and Grace Tea Company Blends: Mark T. Wendell Tea Company was established in 1904 and Grace Tea Company was established in 1959. Both companies are known for their unique black tea blends, some containing as many as 5 differing tea components. Mark T. Wendell Tea Company’s English Breakfast, Irish Breakfast, Russian Caravan, and Iced Tea Blend are proprietary blends that have been blended with care for decades. Mark T. Wendell has had numerous new product introductions in the past year. In the same manner, Grace Tea Company’s Winey Keemun English Breakfast, Connoisseur Master Blend and Owner’s Blend Premium Congou have a loyal following for decades.

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