

The Outpost *Exchange*
Rooibus Tea story
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Rooibus may soon reveal itself as the Cinderella of teas. Unassuming and little known, this late bloomer in the tea world may quickly become the belle of the health-tea ball, surpassing its black and green tea step-sisters as the drink of choice for the health conscious.

As any tea aficionado will quickly point out, Rooibus is not really a tea, but a tisane, also called an infusion. In order to be a true tea, the leaves must come from the *camellia sinensis* plant family. This exclusive group includes green, black and oolong teas and the difference between them is the amount of time the leaves are allowed to oxidize.

Rooibus (pronounced “roy boss”) comes from the needle-like leaves of the “*Aspalathus Linearis*” plant in South Africa. Rooibus, also known as Rooibostee in Afrikaans, means “red bush.” Although the plant itself is green, when harvested and fermented, it turns red. Indeed, before brewing the tea looks like slivers chipped from a ruddy plant; when brewed, it transforms into a rich, velvet red concoction the color of a fine merlot. It tastes as good as it looks—mellow, earthy, full and smooth.

The only place on earth that this jewel of a drink grows is on the diamond-bearing Cedarberg Mountains. Rooibus is a traditional beverage of the Khoi-descended people of the Clanwilliam region of the Cape and is one of only a few indigenous plants that have become an important commercial crop and export for South Africa. Discovered relatively recently—at the turn of the last century—today it is a common drink in South Africa, enjoyed by children and adults alike as much for its pleasing and comforting taste as for any health benefits it may confer. It is served hot or as a refreshing iced beverage.

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Jacobus/Rooibus—Add One

The primary medicinal use for Rooibus in South Africa is as a milk substitute for infants who are prone to colic, due to its anti-spasmodic properties. But, like green tea, Rooibus boasts myriad other health benefits, including aiding with insomnia, inflammation, constipation, irritability, headaches, nervous tension and hypertension, according to studies conducted in South Africa and Japan. Some even claim it helps relieve the symptoms of a hangover. It has been used in South Africa to effectively treat allergies such as hay fever, asthma and eczema and to treat skin irritations. Because of its reported success with dermatological problems, extracts of Rooibus are added to skin care products in South Africa. It contains minerals such as iron, potassium, calcium, copper, zinc, magnesium, fluoride, manganese and sodium. It contains no oxalic acid, making it a good beverage for people prone to kidney stones.

But perhaps its crowning attributes are the fact that it has no caffeine and packs as much as 50 times the anti-oxidant power of green tea. Anti-oxidants have been heralded for their power to slow the aging process and boost the immune system. “I believe that Rooibus is a botanical miracle,” said Melissa Honkamp, who, along with her husband Michael, owns Rochombo, a tea and coffee house on Brady Street. Rochombo carries more than 100 types of loose tea and herbal infusions, including Rooibus

Honkamp discovered Rooibus first-hand while living in South Africa for several months. “In South Africa, people just accept the fact that Rooibus is effective for the treatment of many conditions, but in the US we need to have scientific research to prove each and every reason behind why it works. I like the idea of drinking Rooibus because it’s a pleasing beverage. If a person is provided with relief from certain conditions, that’s great. And if not, you’ve just had an enjoyable experience and added to hydrating your body,” she said.

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Jacobus/Rooibus—Add Two

Rooibus can be purchased in its pure form or as an ingredient in an herbal blend. Honkamp points out that South Africans may add milk, honey or lemon, but that they drink the tea in its original form (not blended). In the US, Rooibus is often used as a base for herbal blending and is marketed more in blends than as a straight beverage for consumption in its simple state. “It’s so palatable in its virgin state. Once people start expanding their horizons of tea, they won’t need the sugar coating [of blends],” Honkamp said.

NOTE to editor: Malcolm—This final paragraph could be used as a boxed item or sidebar

To brew the perfect cup of hot or cold Rooibus, use two teaspoons-one tablespoon (depending on taste preference) of loose Rooibus for every eight ounces of water. A very fine mesh infuser or hemp tea bag is necessary to keep particles of the infusion from floating into the water. Rooibus should be infused for 10 minutes or more to get the full benefit of the anti-oxidant properties. This is the exact opposite of green tea, which begins to lose its anti-oxidant strength after two-three minutes of brewing. Unlike other teas or infusions, the tea will only probably yield only one good infusion. A second dousing results in significantly reduced flavor and color.

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