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Ice lends its frosty and festive flair to food

Heat wave proved handy for invention of iced tea

By Sheila Nero

Ice meant the bitter end for the Titanic, but it meant the sweet beginning for a 1904 discovery: iced tea. The refreshing drink that became the toast of the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis was introduced to the masses at the fair by a British tea merchant who used some Yankee ingenuity (or maybe read some tea leaves).

A heat wave had hit St. Louis along with the wave of fairgoers. The tea merchant, Richard Blechynden, had intended to hand out free cups of his hot tea from India and Ceylon, but he literally could not give it away in the muggy weather.

Blechynden needed a change of fortune, so he bought glass urns with spigots in them, similar to modern office water coolers. He loaded the containers with ice cubes and amber tea. The see-through containers were their own display, with condensation trickling down the sides, and the heat-weary tourists lined up to try the novelty drink. According to an account by the Stash Tea Co., his booth was the hit of the fair.

The cold truth? Blechynden's triumph was not due to his imported tea -- it was due to the ice.

Originally famed for its splashy debut, iced tea has become an everyday drink in restaurants and homes. The traditional lemon and sugar flavorings have been expanded to peach, raspberry and other flavors. Sometimes called "the wine of the South," because of its popularity in that region, iced tea is an alternative to more-filling carbonated beverages.

It's a convenience food that can be made from powdered mix for instant drinks, or bought in bottles, or in cans from vending machines. But many tea lovers like to brew and ice their tea at home the same low-tech way it was made in 1904.

At South Carolina's Charleston Tea Plantation, home of American Classic Tea, owner William Barclay Hall gives this advice:

Always start with fresh cold water. Never use hot water from the tap. Hall explains that cold water contains more oxygen than hot, and oxygen enhances the flavor. For the same reason, don't let the water boil too long, or oxygen will boil out of it and the tea will taste flat.

Here is his basic recipe using tea bags.

Iced Tea

To make a gallon of iced tea, use 7 tea bags. Bring 1 quart of fresh cold water to a rolling boil and quickly pour over tea bags. Let brew 3 to 5 minutes or to desired strength. Squeeze and remove tea bags. Add 3 quarts of fresh cold water. Add sugar or flavoring of choice. Allow to cool. Pour over ice or refrigerate.

Variation: For sun tea, put 7 tea bags in a gallon glass container filled with fresh cold water. Cap loosely, place in sunshine for 3 to 4 hours. Squeeze and remove tea bags. Sweeten to taste. Pour over ice or refrigerate.

