

The evolution of rooibos tea, and why we love it

Rooibos tea has become an integral part of South Africans' way of life and is considered by many as our national beverage. In light of Heritage Month, the SA Rooibos Council (SARC) set out to determine how consumption of this local favourite has changed in recent years by polling more than 1,000 South Africans from diverse cultures and ages about the popular brew.



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According to the survey, Rooibos has moved beyond a mere breakfast beverage with more than half of respondents enjoying it at least three times or more a day – whether it be at home, the office or a café. Twelve percent also cited it as a great after-dinner nightcap to help them relax and unwind after a stressful day.

Nicie Vorster, spokesperson for the SARC, says Rooibos' increasing popularity locally and internationally is encouraging and is a testament to South Africans' affinity for the tea.

But exactly what is it about this humble brew that draws us to it?

Apart from its naturally sweet taste and fruity, woody undertones, the majority (84%) of South Africans who participated in the SARC poll cited Rooibos' health benefits as the number one reason they can't get enough of it. A nostalgic 31% said drinking the tea brings back memories of good times spent with family and friends.



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The majority of survey participants (41%) like to drink their Rooibos in its purest form with nothing added, while 39% add dairy. When it comes to sweetening things up, 21% and 34% does so with a teaspoon of sugar/sweetener or honey respectively, while 17% foregoes sugar entirely. Twenty percent like their Rooibos zesty by adding a touch of lemon, 7% spice it up with cinnamon, while 2% of respondents experiment with fruit for a unique flavour. Some also confessed to adding a tot of whisky or gin for a bit of extra 'skop' in their Rooibos.

A dynamic flavourant

Vorster says the tea can also be used in many different ways in everyday meals and provides a unique flavour profile and personality that can add a touch of exotic to familiar dinners and desserts.

"Using fynbos, such as Rooibos in alcoholic drinks is also very trendy right now and is done from both a flavour-enhancing and preservation perspective. The subtle similarities between tea and spirits make them perfect companions in a cocktail. However you mix it, Rooibos offers a new dimension of flavour and complexity, which is becoming very popular."

What do South Africans enjoy eating most with their national brew? According to the survey, good old rusks topped the list, followed by toast and jam, biscuits and cake.

The perfect brew

When it comes to how the tea should be brewed, die-hard Rooibos fans will duel to the death over the technicalities. The majority (81%) were firm about pouring boiled water over the teabag, while 16% said it should be done the other way around by pouring in the hot water first and then adding the teabag. A sacrilegious 3% toss their cup/mug of water – teabag and all – in the microwave, which in many tea-circles is a big no-no.

Vorster explains that the 16% was right on the money. Rooibos should be brewed with either one to two teaspoons of loose tea leaves or one teabag per cup (250ml) of boiling water for at least five minutes. "Steeping it for longer will increase the antioxidant content in the brewed tea. Pouring boiling water directly on the teabag should be avoided as this is not the best way to get the optimal level of antioxidants in your cup. The tea can then be enjoyed immediately or stored in the fridge," he says.

A cup of Rooibos also makes for interesting dialogue among South Africans. Almost 40% said a shared cuppa among friends or family gave them clarity on how to not only deal with their own personal challenges, but those facing our nation as well. A good gossip and updates on the love-front also counted among the conversations shared.



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When it comes to the type of Rooibos tea product South Africans prefer the most, a whopping 44% said they still like the standard cup of Rooibos the best, while 56% cited Rooibos cappuccinos, espressos, flavoured, chai and iced-tea among their new favourite Rooibos indulgences.

"As a heritage brand, marketers of Rooibos have kept innovating and introducing new Rooibos tea types – growing into new market segments without sacrificing its essence. The fact that so many South Africans still enjoy drinking it in its original

form, speaks volumes about its cultural heritage and strong connection with the people of our land.

“Rooibos remains a big part of the rich tapestry that makes up South African custom and it’s also a brand that ties us together as a country, so let’s all cheers to Rooibos this Heritage Day, while we celebrate all things South African,” encourages Vorster.

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