



# Tea Time

## Georgia makers brew up local flavors, health benefits by the cup

By Erin France

Georgia's tea makers are brewing a hot business. While tongue-twistingly sweet tea may be the "house wine of the South"—according to Dolly Parton in "Steel Magnolias"—Georgia tea makers want people to consider more than the traditional brewed black tea containing a brick of sugar.

### Ashford Tea Co., Savannah; [ashfordtea.co](http://ashfordtea.co)

Wayne Ashford grew up in Indiana drinking the well-known and much-loved iced, sweetened black tea.

When he was 8 years old and restricted to riding his bicycle only one block in each direction from his house, Ashford got to witness the gradual transformation of water into tea. His mother had set out the bags in a Mason jar of cold water on the sidewalk to steep in the sun for hours.

"I didn't know that she went through all that ritual to brew it," Ashford says. "That's how it started with me being intrigued about tea."

Though he is fond of his early tea memories, he drinks mostly hot tea—even in the Savannah summertime—these days and stays away from the added sugar. He says he's never really acquired the taste for coffee, and he hopes to convert more people to picking a tea time over a coffee break.

"My mission and journey has been to reintroduce this lost treasure to America and our communities," Ashford says.

Besides the flavor and variety of tea, Ashford says he appreciates the tea leaf's health benefits, both physical and mental. He says that taking time to drink a cup of tea can inspire introspection and help one gain perspective.

"Our slogan is 'Live life to the tea,'" he says.

Research into tea's health benefits suggests that the drink's

Wayne Ashford, owner of Ashford Tea Co. in Savannah, hosts tea tastings and educational events.

anti-inflammatory and antioxidative properties may aid in reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes.

"[The important thing is] not what's going on around you; it's what's going on in you," Ashford says.

He generally opts for a no-sugar and low-caffeine cuppa to maximize the health benefits of his preferred drink.

Ashford, a self-described health fanatic, chose to move to Savannah from Indianapolis because he wanted a walkable community close to the beach.

"I literally fell in love with [Savannah], and then I started coming back every year" to visit before buying a home and



Andi Biron, co-owner of Biron Organic Teas, shows off a collection of herbal teas packaged in the company's manufacturing facility in Brunswick.

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moving South seven years ago, he says.

The Ashford Tea Co. sells several flavors commemorating Ashford's love of the Savannah region, including the Savannah Breeze, a black tea blended with blueberries, cranberries and safflowers. Other popular flavors include Le Monde de Wayne ("Wayne's World"), a white tea with notes of pear and pineapple, and Health Equi-Tea, a mild rooibos and mint tea formulated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Biron Organic Teas, Brunswick; [birontea.com](http://birontea.com)**

Health and flavor were the twin goals that started Andi and Roland Biron down the road of forming their own company, Brunswick-based Biron Organic Teas.

With Andi Biron's M.S. degree in alternative medicine and her husband's experience as a sommelier, the two began experimenting with adding oils and mixing different flavors to create tasty wellness teas, Andi Biron says.

"It kind of grew very organically from my love of herbs and his love of wine," she says.

The business has grown to include a factory in Brunswick, where their products are mixed and packaged. The company uses certified organic ingredients as well as biodegradable and compostable tea bags.

"We're very sustainable," Biron says. "That's a goal we're really proud of, too."

She suggests dumping used tea bags into a waiting garden bed or flower pot and allowing them to compost without further trouble.

"They're actually great for any kind of garden," she says.

Ultimately, Biron wants to start an organic tea farm, growing the Asian-native tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, which is a relative of the fall- and winter-blooming camellias popular in many Southern yards. Finding a space that fits organic standards has been difficult, Biron says, but she's not giving up.

"We'll find something eventually," she says.

While she admits she can get fussy about her tea, Biron stresses that drinkers should enjoy tea however they like it best—iced or hot and with or without cream and/or sugar.

"You need to do it how you enjoy it," she says.

Biron's popular tea flavors run the gamut but have a theme.

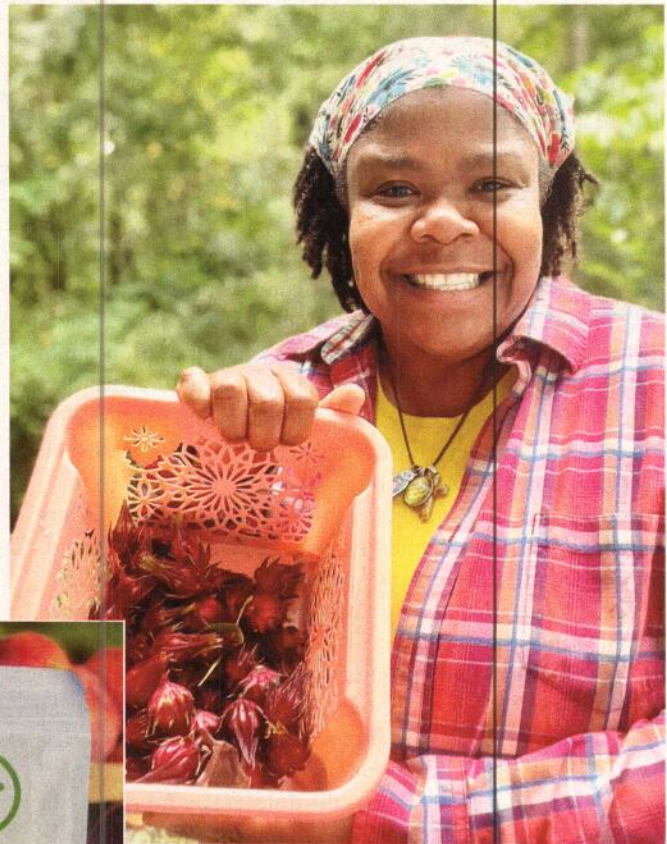
"We focus on Georgia flavors, so we have, of course, peach," Biron says. "It's so ubiquitous here in Georgia."

Other well-liked varieties include a magnolia tea blend, a pecan green tea blend and a cherry blossom flavored tea in honor of Macon's annual International Cherry Blossom Festival.

### **MEplusTEA, Athens; [meplustea.com](http://meplustea.com)**

Precious Jones grew up in the Athens area learning about helpful plants from family members who were experts in herbal lore.

"I grew up with medicinal herbs," she says. "Every ailment was solved with an herb."



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*Precious Jones, owner of MEplusTEA in Athens, displays a harvest of Thai red roselle, which she uses in some of her tea blends. Left: Like other Georgia tea makers, she offers a peach variety.*



The idea of coming up with her own tea blends began percolating when Jones was introduced to loose-leaf tea in 2017.

"With that introduction, I was like, 'Woah; I think I could come up with something,'" she says.

Now, she boasts a line of medicinal as well as flavorful teas for those who are looking for something a little different for their morning brew. Popular mixtures include a caffeinated black tea infused with peaches and an immune-system-boosting elderberry blend.

Besides enjoying the flavor and health benefits of tea, Jones notes that the practice of gathering to drink tea invites people to take a moment together.

"Tea is known for communication, for bringing people together—known for relaxation and conversation," Jones says.

She hopes to aid that conversation further by starting a podcast focused on tea and spirituality in the coming year.

Jones says new tea drinkers don't need to adhere to strict steeping rules and encourages experimentation for different tea varieties. She changes her own technique based on the blend.

"I barely steep my green tea—one to three minutes," she says. "With oolong, I can go a little longer—three to five minutes—because I like more of a bold cup."

When asked how she takes her tea, Jones responds: "Never cream; always honey. I'm from the South." ☪

*Erin France is a freelance writer based in Lexington.*



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