

Ever Wonder Who Invented The Tea Bag?

Its two competing origin stories are linked by one thing: convenience

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The tea bag made it possible to brew a single cup of tea rather than a whole pot. (Simotion via iStock)

By [Kat Eschner](#)

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Today, on International Tea Day, take a little time out of your busy life to learn about some tea history.

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Most of the tea in the United States is consumed using an invention that's a little over one hundred years old: the tea bag. Before the tea bag, a whole pot of tea had to be made by pouring hot water over leaves in a tea strainer.

The tea bag has two competing origin stories, [writes](#) Sarah Stone for Gizmodo. The first starts with a [1901 patent application](#) by two women from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Roberta C. Lawson and Mary Molaren designed the "Tea-Leaf Holder." "They had identified an issue with the way tea had been commonly brewed for thousands of years," Stone writes: having to make a whole pot of tea for the sake of having a single cup meant the rest of the pot was wasted. The easiest solution: just brew the tea in the cup you wanted to drink it from. But they had to make sure the leaves wouldn't just be floating in the tea, "which would spoil the pleasure of the drink." Hence their patented mesh bag.

The second is about Thomas Sullivan, a tea merchant. In 1908, the story goes, Sullivan began sending samples of his wares to his customers in small silk bags "as a way of encouraging sales," Stone writes. But his customers immediately saw the convenience of brewing in these bags. "The little marketing campaign worked and orders started rolling in, which Sullivan initially filled via standard containers of loose-leaf tea," she writes. "Customers who had used the bags as infusers complained and Sullivan soon began offering his tea in bags."

The tea bag changed tea forever, but at this late date it's hard to know exactly what impact either Lawson and Molaren or Sullivan had. "While it does appear there was a tea merchant named Thomas Sullivan who helped popularize selling tea in single-serve bags," she writes, there's not much documented evidence to give proof to individual parts of the Sullivan story. And though the 1901 Tea-Leaf Holder's design was better than many of the early commercial tea bags that followed Sullivan's 1908 design, many of which used nasty-tasting glue to seal their bags, nothing indicates that

Molaren and Lawson got rich off their patent.

What is safe to say is that the tea bag is a product of the early twentieth century. By the 1920s the bag was a firmly established way of drinking tea in America, [writes](#) Florence Fabricant for The New York Times. But then it got a bad name: “companies began compromising quality, and before long the little paper pouches were filled with the lowest grades of tea,” Fabricant writes. “Consumers did not object. In fact, they like the fact that the minute particles in tea bags required but a few seconds in hot water to produce deeply colored, strong flavored liquid.”

The convenience of tea bags made them a hit in the United States, writes Stone. And when the 1950s came around, cementing convenience as a domestic value, “the tea bag saw a huge surge in popularity,” she writes. That includes in Britain, where the tea bag had not been as popular.

You probably don’t think about the tea bag much. But as the pleasure of a cup of tea shows, it’s the little things that count.

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