

PLASTIC-FREE TEAS

Sustainable tea companies work to educate customers about their packaging.

By Robin Roenker



Last fall, an academic study published in *Environmental Science & Technology* made headlines. Its finding: plastic tea bags can release billions of plastic microparticles and nanoparticles into tea during seeping.

The study's Montreal-based university researchers found that a single plastic tea bag placed into a cup at 95 degrees Celsius can release traces of both nylon and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) into the tea at a rate magnitudes higher than plastic levels previously reported in other food and drink scenarios. The researchers did not name the specific brands of tea that were tested.

The resulting news blasts sparked a wave of consumer questions about safe tea packaging. Practically overnight, tea drinkers everywhere found themselves wondering, "Is my tea safe?"

CONSUMER EDUCATION

In the days and weeks following news of the study, employees of Metropolitan Luxury Tea found themselves fielding a steady stream of client questions about the safety of their tea packaging. News reports that summarized the study, in some cases, were "a little misleading," says John Chaffey, sales manager with Metropolitan, because they seemed to suggest that all pyramid-style tea bags are made of nylon mesh; in contrast, Metropolitan's METZ Tea uses pyramid bags made with only compostable, plant-based material.

"We always focus on sustainability," says Chaffey. "It's part of our culture. We've never used nylon, ever. We try to be as natural as possible."

The company used the opportunity to quickly set the record straight about their pyramid bags, which are made from a woven material formed from strands of corn starch that's naturally biodegradable and compostable.

"We released a post about it on Instagram, to explain that our bags are plant-based, not plastic-based," says



Chaffey. “We also sent a detailed news release to all of our clients, to help them understand the issue from a technical standpoint. We wanted our [wholesale] clients to be able to communicate the distinction properly with consumers.”

The company took action to get ahead of—and alleviate—potential consumer fears.

“There can be a sort of alarmist approach to certain media outlets, and quite often there is misleading information in the marketplace,” says Chaffey. “Because of that, we felt it was important to be transparent and communicate to our clients in a timely manner.”

Like METZ, teapigs tea company uses no plastics in their pyramid tea bags, which teapigs calls “tea temples.” Facing frequent queries about packaging safety, the company has been using social media to help get the word out that their tea bags are plant-based and biodegradable.

“Our social media posts about having plastic-free packaging have definitely been some of our most popular,” says teapigs cofounder Louise Cheadle.

“Our tea temples are fully derived from plants—corn starch, to be precise. We are happy to say our tea temples have always been plastic-free and have been certified plastic-free by A Plastic Planet.”

Even the inner clear bags in teapigs’ tea packaging are now plastic-free; they’re made from NatureFlex, a bio-film that’s derived from wood pulp, so it’s fully compostable.

In addition to showcasing its plastic-free commitment on social platforms and its website, teapigs has recently introduced updated labeling to its packaging “to clearly communicate what our packaging is made of and how to dispose of it safely,” says Cheadle.

BROADER SUSTAINABLE PLATFORM

While taking active steps to reassure customers that their teas are plastic-free, the broader message from both



companies has been clear: Avoiding plastics is key, but it represents merely one component of their holistic approach to sustainability.

Both companies work to share details of their broad-based sustainable platform whenever possible, often as part of their plastic-free messaging outreach.

Winner of multiple awards for its sustainable production practices, Metropolitan Tea Group became carbon neutral in 2011, after planting 15,000 trees on abandoned farmland in Southwest Ontario. In 2012, it installed a 500 kWh solar array on the rooftop of its main Toronto facility, which generates more than five times the electricity required for production. The company also sources its teas ethically, working to ensure that farmers are fairly compensated and that harvest practices are environmentally sound.

In addition to its green packaging—which is all recyclable, compostable, or biodegradable—teapigs believes in the importance of ethical sourcing and is a member of the Ethical Tea Partnership, a nonprofit that works to promote sustainable tea practices to benefit workers, farmers, and the environment. Its signature everyday brew is Rainforest Alliance Certified.



As important as all those steps are, plastic still remains front of mind for many consumers.

“The consumer awareness surrounding plastic and the harmful effect that it has on our environment is a hot topic internationally,” says Cheadle, who works from the company’s Brentford, United Kingdom headquarters. “Many of our international accounts have stressed that plastic-free and sustainability [factors] are becoming key deciders when picking the brands they stock.” 