

The revival of America's only native caffeinated plant

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Sometimes life has a funny way of giving you direction. For me, I fell right into co-founding Yaupon Tea Co. when I literally tripped over a Yaupon holly plant while out in the field for one of my environmental science classes. While in shock I turned to a buddy and asked him "what was that?" That one simple question has both defined and enriched my life the last year while on this wild adventure to start a sustainable tea company. Soon after figuring out what "that" plant was I quickly fell down the yaupon rabbit hole and began to discover its rich and mysterious history here in the southeast, along with the copious amounts of health benefits packed into one little leaf.

Indigenous peoples have been sustainably drinking yaupon tea for thousands of years in ceremonial and casual settings, so why isn't this plant being used more when it checks all the boxes for being a more sustainable and local alternative to its imported, carbon footprint heavy, caffeinated counterparts? A local tea company that educates and enlightens people on the wonders of yaupon holly while revitalizing the environment at the same time almost made too much sense. My old friend and fellow environmental advocate, Megan Rowe, joined me in the endeavor.

Our original draw to yaupon tea was how much of a powerhouse this plant was with its unique natural sweetness and gentle energy from high quality caffeine. Not only does it taste great and makes you feel even better, but it is also the only native source of caffeine and exclusively grows right here in the Southeastern US. The stabilizing energy that yaupon gives you is not just from caffeine it contains; it is also packed with a myriad of important vitamins and antioxidants that decrease the negative side effects of caffeine such as jitters, anxiety, crashing, etc., and increases cognition, immune health, circulation, and more!

With our tagline "Restoring people and native ecosystems with every sip", you may realize that drinking yaupon tea is not just about your health, but it



Cassina iced tea. COURTESY OF MEGAN ROWE

also nuances our sustainable practices in every step. Our innovative circular business model allows us to work with a network of local farmers, land managers, and landowners to sustainably supply our wild-harvested yaupon. Yaupon holly is an important native plant that can revitalize native ecosystems. Butterflies and other pollinators nectar at the blooms, and the fruits are food for songbirds and small mammals. It also provides important winter cover, is deer resistant and salt tolerant. Its small greenish-white flowers appear on male and female plants in the spring. The female plant exhibits 1/4 inch red drupes in clusters which mature in fall

and persist into winter. Learn more about this great coastal North Carolina plant by visiting <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/ilex-vomitorea/>.

Andrew Kiley is the proprietor of Yaupon Tea Co. For information about Yaupon Tea Co.'s projects or products visit <https://yaupon.store/>. To see Yaupon holly and other native plants, please visit the New Hanover County Arboretum, free and open daily from 8 a.m.–5 p.m. To purchase Yaupon Tea, visit the Friends of the Arboretum Gift Shop, open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m., 6206 Oleander Drive in Wilmington.



A handful of freshly hand-picked Yaupon. COURTESY OF MEGAN ROWE