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Teahouses' Unique Blends Are Not Just in the Cup



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Bay Area teahouses offer variety. At the Imperial Tea Court in Berkeley, patrons can have a cup of tea in the garden.

By GREGORY DICUM
Published: January 1, 2010

At Om Shan [Tea](#), the air is filled with the clatter of small earthenware teapots, the sound of ethereal gongs and flutes and quiet animated conversation. Tea drinkers cluster on reed stools around low tables surrounded by antiques from tea-drinking lands.

— **Bay Area Report** —

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Oshan Anand, the owner of this year-old teahouse in the Mission district of San Francisco, sits at an antique tea table of dark wood and stone and pours tiny cups of pu-erh, the aged Chinese tea that, like wine, is often known by region and vintage.

Om Shan Tea is the newest of a breed of Bay Area teahouses that are reimagining the world's ancient and diverse tea drinking customs for modern tea drinkers. Each is an expression of the founders' sensibilities, and each draws fervid followers.

Samovar, in the Castro, makes tea drinking a stylish affair. Teas from around the world are served as they are in their home countries: Japanese maki bowls of rice and seaweed

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Peter DaSilva for The New York Times
Patrons can choose a Gong Fu presentation, with a stream of different vessels and cups.

with ryokucha brown rice tea (\$17), English tea service with scones and Devonshire cream (\$19), Chinese tea with dumplings (\$19) and masala chai with curry (\$17). Russian tea is poured from a gleaming samovar (\$9 for a bottomless cup).

“We bring the world’s tea traditions under one roof,” said Jesse Jacobs, who opened Samovar in 2001. “It’s contemporary and hip but also respecting tradition.”

Visitors to Numi Tea Garden in Oakland can enjoy a tea ceremony that involves small clay pots on a bamboo tray next to a Buddha figurine and a set of tools.

“You get the Buddha’s belly all wet for good luck,” said Ahmed Rahim, an owner of the Numi Organic Tea company who developed this whimsical take on traditional Chinese tea ceremonies.

The Bay Area loves its [coffee](#), but there is a certain sameness to its coffeehouses. Its teahouses, though, all seem to have unusual offerings. Menus include rare teas and obscure herbs, with teatime snacks from around the world that are hearty enough to make a light meal.

Though many occupy spaces that used to be coffeehouses, it’s too early to call tea drinking a trend that will replace espresso anytime soon. Instead, it’s a parallel, calmer universe.

When people double-park outside Samovar and run in for a cup to go, the way many are accustomed to grab lattes with one nervous eye out for a parking ticket, “we give them a free chai sample,” Mr. Jacobs said, “and they go park and come back.”

“That’s the philosophy of tea,” he said. “It’s about stopping for one moment and taking assessment of your surroundings.”

The original Samovar was so distinctive and enjoyable that the city invited Mr. Jacobs to open a branch in Yerba Buena Gardens to replace a Starbucks in 2006, and the San Francisco Zen Center asked him this year to open a teahouse in a space it owns across the street.

Numi Tea Garden is near the offices and warehouses of Numi Organic Tea, which Mr. Rahim founded 10 years ago with a sibling. The teahouse serves more than 80 kinds of tea and herbal teas — everything that Numi sells, Mr. Rahim said.

Roy Fong, a tea importer and wholesaler, is something of a father figure to the fine-tea scene. He opened Imperial Tea Court in Chinatown in 1993 so he could serve teas that were too good for the mass market.

That location closed, but at locations in San Francisco’s Ferry Building and Berkeley’s Gourmet Ghetto, aficionados can try monkey-picked Tieguanyin Oolong or pu-erhs he has aged himself for two decades, producing a distinctive Bay Area flavor profile unlike any aged in China.

At Imperial Tea Court, tea is served either in a lidded cup called a gaiwan (\$5 or \$8) or in the full Gong Fu presentation (\$12), an elaborate affair that Mr. Fong and his staff are happy to explain at length. Various vessels of fine Yixing clay are brought together to produce an endless stream of tiny cups of clear, warm subtlety.

Mr. Fong offers everything from a quick glass of custom red iced tea (\$3) to the full three-hour Chinese tea ceremony (\$50 a person, 10 people minimum, by appointment).

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Each location has a different menu of organic Chinese teahouse food that is lighter and more refined than most Chinese fare. In particular, the Berkeley location’s hand-pulled Northern-Chinese-style organic noodles (\$10) stand out.

If there is anything these teahouses share, it is a feeling of hospitality and a sense of community. “I see a lot of connections being made around the tea bar,” said Mr. Anand of Om Shan Tea.

The low-key approach seems to make sense. Mr. Fong said sales had been brisk in spite of the economy. “There has been no recession for me at all,” he said.

Mr. Fong is expanding on land outside the city, where he hopes to grow tea and open what he says will be his last teahouse.

Mr. Jacobs is also upbeat, but his plans for Samovar are less grand. “I’m just going to have tea,” he said. “And if I do it right, people will come to me. That’s the growth plan.”

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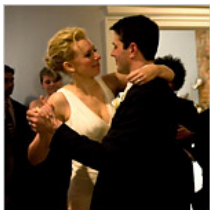
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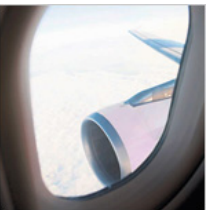
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