



## THE LIFE & STYLE OF A *Chinese Tea Sommelier*

Traditional Chinese teahouses are few and far between in cosmopolitan Singapore.

If you are looking for that authentic Dancong Oolong tea that is freshly brewed right from the heart, Yixing Xuan is likely your preferred cup of tea. This habitat is tucked away amongst the row of beautifully restored pre-war shop houses along Duxton Road, just 10 minutes' away from Tanjong Pagar MRT station.

Decked throughout in light colors, this Chinese teahouse cleverly marries stylistic modern furnishing with traditional furniture in the form of marble top tables and stocky wooden chairs that give Singaporeans and travelers a nostalgic feel of old China.

This is definitely not an old-school Chinese teahouse as the modern twist begins with the shop's second-generation owner. Yixing Xuan is run by Charlene Low herself. Charlene is an expert at Chinese tea – for health, pleasure and wellness. She treats Chinese tea as a sommelier would wine. She knows the

different types and grades of Chinese tea like the back of her hand. She is well aware that Chinese tea have numerous health and beauty benefits. She is Singapore's very own Chinese tea sommelier.

Growing up watching her father prepare Chinese tea for his customers spun Charlene's fascination with all things tea. And out of this fascination with all things tea that her obsession with Chinese tea is honed. And it would later prove useful because, after nine years of trading and selling bonds in the bank, she realized that she loved Chinese tea more than banking.

For Charlene, there's story in the leaves and the way she serves tea. She shares that when it rains, the dragonfly hops from one lily pad to another, pouring Oolong tea back and forth. The story serves a triple purpose. It entertains in what could otherwise be a tedious process in Chinese tea making. It puts an end to an awkward moment of silence and make people who have not met before feel more comfortable with each other. And it brings to life sensual imagery that lasts.

Charlene knows that Singapore does not have a strong tea-drinking culture compared to China. But she is optimistic and hopes that one day, she could impart her knowledge and tea-making skills to young Singaporeans. We find out from Charlene why she loves Oolong tea, what life as a Chinese tea sommelier is like, and how to steep a nice, warm cup of Chinese tea.



**EB:** We understand that the Chinese tea-drinking culture or "Yum Cha" is picking up in Singapore. What's your take on this?

**CL:** The Chinese tea-drinking culture is a social function for people to connect with one another and have a good conversation or heart-to-heart talk. That's how Yum Cha as a culture came about. But you won't get to see Yum Cha happening at formal birthdays or weddings.

If you want to appreciate good Chinese tea, you should take it pure. Not with any sugar, milk or food (ideally!) because flavors alter the taste of the beverage. But tea is a good accompaniment with dim sum; it aids digestion, cleanses your palate and washes down the oil. It is no wonder why bak kut teh is served with Chinese tea.

Honestly, I'm not too sure if Yum Cha is picking up in Singapore but I do know the coffee-drinking culture is crazy. Singaporeans are very Westernized; so we're probably looking at a long and thirsty road ahead for tea-drinking and appreciation but at the moment, it's the travelers and international school students who are into it. Well, a couple of days back, we hosted two large groups of students at Yixing Xuan from the United World College. Still, I don't know whether Yum Cha is popular in Singapore.

Looking at the health perspective, there's definitely more people interested in the health benefits of drinking tea – even young Singaporeans come to Yixing Xuan to find out in detail the various health benefits drinking tea brings. And with a more affluent people, people are traveling to China and Taiwan where there's a much bigger tea-drinking culture than in Singapore, thus they are exposed to the Chinese way of life and are bringing their travels back to share with the public.

**EB:** What is "Yum Cha" and how did it all come about?

**CL:** Yum Cha is "he cha" (drink tea) in Chinese and it goes a long way back to the days of Chinese monarch rule. In the past, it was the Chinese Emperor and scholars who enjoyed drinking tea and I guess it were them who popularized tea-drinking as a social function.

Today, tea-drinking is practiced by people who love the arts and culture, or individuals who love spending quality time with their family and friends in a quiet and peaceful environment...yeah, these are the people who come to Yixing Xuan to have their Chinese tea.



**EB:** What about tea appreciation?

**CL:** Tea appreciation is the art of making and brewing tea that is made popular by the Chinese scholars. It all started with Chinese tea scholar Lu Yu, better known as "The Father of Tea", who wrote the tea classics. In his book, Lu Yu teaches people how to grow good tea crops, and make and steep the perfect cup of tea.

Lu Yu also wrote about his experiences how drinking tea made him feel and the conditions required to make and steep the perfect cup of tea. He also popularized the concept of "seven to tea brewing" which simply means you can brew tea seven times and, interestingly, in a poetic way. I guess people in the past love to drink tea the poetic way!

**EB:** What's your favorite brew and why?

**CL:** [Laughs] It's very hard to ask a tea drinker to answer this question! In the mornings I usually have something that is lighter.

After a meal I'll take tea that is stronger like, say, Oolong tea.

I guess the types of tea I drink most often are white and green tea. White tea is very, very light in color, hence its name. It is actually the bark of the tea plant; hence it is the least processed item and has the least amount of caffeine compared to the other types of tea. White tea has a very subtle taste and fragrance. Types of tea. White tea has a very subtle taste and fragrance.

