

STEEPED IN TRADITION

Traditional and modern tea practitioners are bringing Chinese tea appreciation back in vogue

JESSICA CHAN

ANTEA SOCIAL ISN'T your typical cafe. Devoid of the noise of espresso machines, the menu features only unblended tea leaves, like oolong infused with essential oils by a Nantou-based tea maker, and artisanal Pouchong from Pinglin. They are served hot in a set consisting of a ceramic pot, timer, fairness cup (*gong dao bei*) and a teacup of your choice; or what founder Jolene Seow defines as a "simplified version" of traditional tea ceremonies.

Over at Fort Sanctuary, founder Lau Kiat Boon doesn't just peddle the brand's unique WuYi Rock Essence tea leaves. He walks guests through the layers of tasting notes associated with fine teas - fragrance, structure, texture, body and terroir - through four different varietals in just 15 minutes (\$\$19/person).

"It can be hard to discern its layers, particularly of premium, complex teas. I've designed this concise session to be quick and breezy, and give the drinker a benchmark for appreciating traditional teas apart from my product," explains Mr Lau.

Third wave coffee may be going strong in Singapore but there has been a slow rise in tea-centric cafes and teahouses, intent on promoting tea culture in Singapore - with much success.

Modern teahouse Hvala expanded into prime locations at CHJMES and TripleOne Somerset within a year, and appointment-only TEA BONE ZEN MIND commands a strong following for owner Carrie Chen's exquisite collection on Emerald Hill.

Stalwarts, including Tea Chapter and Pek Sin Choon, have not only withstood the test of time, but remain popular spots for locals and tourists just discovering the world of Chinese tea.

"There has definitely been an uptake of interest in the last four years," says Vincent Low, who founded YiXing Xuan TeaHouse back in 1989. "The younger generation (20s to 30s) are actively signing up for our tea courses or walking in to learn about traditional teas."

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

"There is a growing discernment for products of genuine quality and, inherently, good value," explains tea practitioner Kenny Leong, who conducts in-depth workshops on tea and who has consulted for the tea menu at Odette. "As with coffee, where the entry of third-wave spots and micro-roasters give consumers a finer appreciation of it, the emergence of tea brands and places are fostering the growth of tea culture in Singapore."

While Mr Leong laments that "there is still quite some way to go before Singapore reaches the same level of quality" for tea,



(1) Tea blending by AnTea Social. (2) Kenny Leong, tea practitioner. (3) Flowering tea made from bundled up tea leaves and flowers which unfolds into a blooming flower when steeped. (4) Four varietals of WuYi Rock Essence tea that's used by Fort Sanctuary to walk guests through the layers of tasting notes associated with fine teas. (5) Vincent Low, founder of YiXing Xuan TeaHouse. (6) A tea appreciation session at YiXing Xuan TeaHouse.

PICTURES BY ANTEA SOCIAL, KENNY LEONG, FORT SANCTUARY AND YIXING XUAN TEAHOUSE.

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VINCENT LOW



we are headed in the right direction.

"Getting people to ultimately understand and appreciate Chinese tea as a lifestyle stems from us, as practitioners, making our knowledge accessible to them," says Mr Low.

In his case, Mr Leong conducts a variety of tea masterclasses that delve into topics such as different tea types, history, preparation and challenges faced by the tea trade. There is also the option of experiencing *cha hui*, a formal ceremonial performance with tea, incense and, occasionally, traditional music.

Places like Tea Chapter and YiXing Xuan TeaHouse also regularly host classes on Chinese culture and tea preparation to tour groups, corporations, local community centres and schools.

Likewise, Ms Seow's AnTea Social uses a proprietary technique of slow baking oolong leaves over two months to create crowd-pleasing aromas that encourage new drinkers to explore tea's flavour profile. "Once I've piqued their interest, they can continue to explore our single-origin teas. Our minimalist take on the *kung fu pao* also gives them a glimpse of what proper tea ceremonies are like," she adds.

There is also Teapasar, an online marketplace for local and international boutique tea brands, which allows buyers to "Discover Their Perfect Blend" with ease. Eight parameters, including sweetness, astringency, umami and

aftertaste, can be adjusted to reveal a list of recommended teas that have been authenticated by ProfilePrint (a portable food scanner for plant-based products).

Another form of appreciation is perhaps through beverage pairing. Tian Fu Tearoom, an extension of Si Chuan Dou Hua, offers exquisite teas, ranging from Dianhong to Da Hong Pao, to pair with their high tea and set menus; not unlike wine pairing menus.

One such convert is financial analyst Foong Chi Hou, who says, "While I am a fan of spirits, alcohol is not something you can indulge in everyday. Tea, however, offers me just as much flavour payoff as spirits." Mr Foong regularly travels up to Taiwan for his collection of premium tea leaves.

Still, these tea practitioners are well aware that there are two kinds of tea drinkers - those who like it enough to want to learn more from the experts, and others who simply enjoy a delicious tea beverage out of a mug.

Prices, too, have to match. Although traditional tea houses specialise in rare, coveted tea leaves that command astronomical prices, they also have plenty of more affordable counterparts.

"We understand that people can be at a different part of their tea journey and they take their time to explore the teas they love, gradually, without breaking the bank," explains Mr. Low.

TEA BREAK

BEAUTY OF THE EAST

Yi Xing Xuan TeaHouse, Singapore
From \$26/\$50g

A Taiwan oolong that's unique to Yi Xing Xuan TeaHouse and a good introduction to the world of tea appreciation. Good for three rounds of brewing, it lures newbies and long-time tea drinkers with its bittersweet aroma and aftertaste.

www.yixingxuan-teahouse.com

MANGO OOLONG

AnTea Social, Singapore
From \$10/\$10g

Essential oils from Taiwan's prized Aiwun mangoes baked with Oolong from Nantou County, Taiwan by Taiwanese tea maker (with more than 40 years of experience) to create this enticing brew.

www.anteasocial.com.sg

2018 LAOCONG SHUIXIAN

Eagle Tea Merchant, Singapore
Price upon request

Comparable to the fine wines of Burgundy, according to Mr. Leong. This tea is made from trees of at least 60 years of age and offers exceptional richness and notes of fresh flowers and stone fruits.

www.eagleteamerchant.com

TAIPING HOUKUI NO. 6

Daorenhang, Anhui, China
(\$388/\$400g)

Characterised by its thin, oval leaves, Taiping Houkui is one of China's 10 famous teas. It is organically grown at the base of Huangshan before its hand-picked and -produced by local farmers. It boasts a fresh, sweet fragrance akin to orchids and a smooth body with slight umami.

www.teapasar.com

2008 AGED TIE GUAN YIN

Hermits Hut, Taipei
US\$124/100g

Fourth-generation tea maker of Cheng Chuan Tea Factory (originally from Fujian) offers 2008 Aged (8 years) Tie Guan Yin from San Xia, Taiwan exclusively at Hermit's Hut, Taipei. Be enamoured by the aromas of candied jujubes and caramel, before sipping on its delightful layers of ripe fruits and orchids.

hermitshut.myshopify.com

516 WUYI ROCK-ESSENCE

Fort Sanctuary
From \$30/\$24g

The mineral-rich soil at UNESCO World Heritage Site, Mount Wuyi, give rise to delicate oolong leaves that are harvested only once a year. Expert tea processing techniques in China and Singapore are employed in tandem to bring out the elegant flavours in the 516 variant that's grown in zhengyan (prime locale) of the region.

fortsanctuary.com