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The resurgence of tea in a coffee town

By Taya Flores
Seattle Times staff

Rich Tao hurriedly brings a cake of pu'er, a fermented tea, into Floating Leaves Tea in Ballard. He unwraps it and lets owner Shiuwen Tai take a peek at the cake, which looks like a brown disk of dirt and twigs.

It's Tai's favorite type of tea.

Whenever Tao, a customer and local real-estate agent, gets time, he likes to stop in and share his latest tea import. He and Tai often sit and drink in the Chinese custom — slowly brewing green teas, oolongs or pu'ers in tiny tea pots and sniffing the fragrance from teaware specifically designed to capture the smell.

In Seattle, a tea culture is brewing — from sipping in quaint British tearooms or exotic Asian teahouses to brewing new blends at home.

"There's been a resurgence in tea as an alternative to coffee," said Julee Rosanoff, co-owner of Perennial Tea Room in Pike Place Market. "Tea is a gentler drink, and we have access to a wider variety of tea. When I was growing up, the only tea we had was Lipton."

Rosanoff, 64, is a part of an organization formed in June called the Puget Sound Tea Education Association, composed of tea industry professionals. The group is trying to organize a Northwest Tea Festival for next fall and stake a presence at this year's Seattle Food and Wine Festival, Nov. 16-18 at the Washington State Convention & Trade Center.

"There's been a groundswell of information and interest in tea, and people are taking advantage of it," Rosanoff said.

A spot of British tea

At Queen Mary Tea Room in Seattle, formal afternoon tea is a celebration.

The menu, décor and ambience recall the feminine Victorian pastime of drinking tea. About 30 women and a few men sit in the cozy dining room at tiny tables tucked in corners, amid fabric-lined walls and a shelf of tea pots.

Sitting in one corner, 56-year-old Arlene Smith wears a sparkling tiara as she takes slow, methodic bites of a rich chocolate cake and sips vanilla crème tea from a porcelain cup decorated with flowers.



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Rich Tao, left, and Shiuwen Tai savor the fragrance and taste of their tea at Floating Leaves Tea. Tao, a "regular" at Tai's Ballard shop, favors High Mountain Oolong, from Taiwan.



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Rich Tao savors his tea's fragrance, captured in the lid while steeping.

"I like the atmosphere, the festivity of it," she says.

Smith and two friends have come to celebrate her bridal shower. The three women sit at a table littered with English bone china; teapots; saucers; and a three-tiered dessert tray once full of fruit, finger sandwiches and pastries.

"It's such a feminine thing to do," says 46-year-old Carol Monteleone-Whiteside, "What's better than getting your hair done and having tea?"

At a nearby table, Liezel Moraleja-Hackett sits alone, eating desserts and drinking tea. She drinks a black Irish breakfast tea in the English tradition, by adding sugar and milk.

"I was supposed to meet someone here to talk about a wedding, but she couldn't make it," she said. "But it didn't stop me from having afternoon tea."

Hackett is fascinated by tea and has been drinking it for about 10 years, choosing from her home collection of loose-leaf tea and tea bags.

"It feels organic, and there's such a variety of flavors," she says.

She also has a collection of teapots that she bought impulsively, and is trying to grow an herbal tea garden in her backyard.

A mother and daughter duo — Edie and Tracy Laird — are at the teahouse to celebrate a friend's birthday.

The two have traveled all over the world, trying different afternoon teas in Egypt, Istanbul and London.

"It's comforting," says 57-year-old Edie Laird, Tracy's mother. She started drinking it at 4 when she visited her grandmother in New York. Her favorite tea is a smoky-flavored Lapsang Souchong.

Asian tea

At Floating Leaves Tea, Tai bustles around the shop decorated to evoke tea houses in her native Taiwan. Paper lanterns hang from the ceiling, miniature teapots are neatly displayed and an Asian flute plays in the background.

Bubbly and sporting a tiny baby bump, Tai has a genuine love for tea that evokes her childhood. "If I have to go on without tea in my life, I would be really sad," she says. "Tea enriches my life."

She sells tea from China, Taiwan and Japan.

Customer Tao, 27, has been coming to Floating Leaves for about a year. He drinks tea in the Chinese gaiwan style, which refers to the porcelain vessel that brews the tea. He brews loose-leaf tea in the gaiwan (lid and bowl in Chinese) and lets it steep for about a minute.

Tao enjoys light, subtle teas — his favorite is High Mountain Oolong from Taiwan.

He started drinking tea as a young boy when his dad's friend introduced him to the gongfu style of tea, which has a



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This five-ounce Mengku Cake of fermented tea sells for \$20 at Floating Leaves Tea.



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Tips of buds from a white tea, already used for one pot of tea, will be used again at another table.

darker brew and a robust flavor.

"I serve tea to relax clients, share my culture and invite them into my personal space," he says.

A cup of your own

Jeannie Liu and her husband Thong Le opened Miro Tea in Ballard in August. Miro Tea is a modern twist on the traditional Chinese teahouse.

Liu serves dessert and dinner crepes and has a tea bar where customers can sample brewing teas.

"People here have been marginalized by coffee shops," says Liu, 28. "With Miro, we are trying to showcase the tea and tea drinker."

Holly Roe and a friend sit at a wooden table in the tea bar that takes its design cues from an upscale coffee shop. The tea bar and wall bench are modern finished wood carvings with organic interweaving branches and natural rough edges.

Roe sips tea from a wooden tray with a timer and small tea light to keep it warm.

"I like the tea ritual, holding the cup," says the 54-year-old mom from Phinney Ridge as she drinks a black tea from Northern India.

Karen McNerney, 50, also likes the ritual of tea. She is at a table barricaded by shelves of yarn at Shoreline's Yarn and Tea Shop.

"It feels good to me. It's part of my morning routine," she says, knitting along with five other women at their weekly class.

Family tea ties

Rafa Celis-Epstein, 10, pours a drizzle of honey into a blue porcelain cup to sweeten the chai his grandmother has given him. He's playing Continental Rummy on a cloudy Monday afternoon at Teahouse Kuan Yin in Wallingford.

He's here with his grandmother, Sylvia Angel; his mother, Deborah Epstein; and her partner, David Seborer.

The teahouse is their hangout.

"This tea shop introduced us to finer points in tea," Deborah Epstein says. "Before I used to [use] tea bags, but now I can tell the difference between black teas."

Epstein, 39, used to be a coffee drinker in college. She converted five years ago after Teahouse Kuan Yin exposed her to quality teas.

"This atmosphere is peaceful and conducive to studying or hanging out, plus I really like the tea," she said.

Seborer, 40, says coffee made him too jittery. The yoga teacher also likes to drink tea to help him stay awake but not overdose on caffeine.

For this family, the tea is a brew that invites them to spend time together.



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At Floating Leaves Tea in Ballard, teapots, pitchers and cups are chosen for how they enhance the character of each tea.

"It's just about the fun," Rafa said.

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