

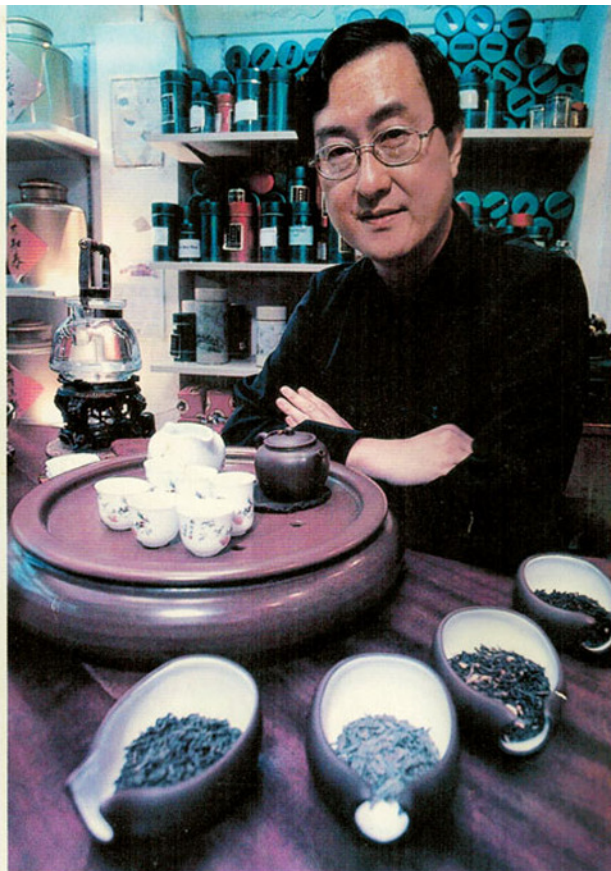
ALL THE TEA IN CHINA

There's more to making tea than meets the eye as you can discover at Mr Low's Singapore teahouse.

With its rosewood tables overhung by scarlet lanterns and walls decorated with Chinese watercolours and calligraphy scrolls, the Yixing Xuan teahouse could be a tableau from Tang dynasty Shanghai. But when its owner—clad in a navy Mandarin-style jacket—welcomes you in perfect English and hands over a business card inscribed Vincent Low, MBA, you are left in no doubt that this is 21st-century Singapore. Low, a former banker, may have completed his master's degree in London but his heart is in China and he went on to study at Taiwan's famous Lu Yu "university of tea". Upon his return to Singapore some 12 years ago, steeped in the finer points of Chinese tea, he and a co-owner set up their own teahouse in Chinatown.

The Yixing (happy and relaxing) Xuan (small house) was one of the pioneers among what are now a cluster of teahouses in this part of the city. Yet it remains the venue of choice for visitors keen to learn more about what exactly they are drinking, thanks to its excellent tea appreciation courses. Seated at polished tables, a kettle bubbling convivially at the centre, customers are invited to sip from miniature porcelain cups as they learn the rudiments of an art that rivals the tasting of fine wines in complexity. Soon they are coaxed into describing a green tea made from leaves picked at dawn in Hangzhou as having the freshness of mown grass or melon seeds, or expressing a preference for a variety such as Dragon's Well over a superb Goddess of Mercy or Beauty Slim.

Unlike tea-drinking in Japan, there is no "ceremony" attached to Chinese tea: rather it is an elaborate process designed to draw out the drink's finest nuances, to be savoured over good conversation among friends. As Mr Low explains, the dolls-house-style



cups and pots are deliberately sized "to slow you down and encourage you to relax". They also ensure that the drink is never left to stew, and is always at the perfect temperature. The purpose of drinking Chinese tea is not to slake the thirst: instead it is to inhale the delicate aromas, to let the flavours of the tea develop on the palate, to hold and admire the beautifully decorated cups and to appreciate the entire ambience conjured up by the décor and background classical Chinese music.

The method of tea-making itself is based on ancient Chinese principles perfected since they were first set out in the *Book of Tea* by the great doyen Lu Yu in 760AD. There are countless different procedures matched to different types of tea leaves, using a variety of pots, strainers and jugs—all of which must be coordinated to produce the perfect brew. The boiling water in the transparent kettle, for instance, must be carefully monitored so that the size of the bubbles indicates the correct temperature for the pot: "eyes of prawns" for green tea, "eyes of crab" for jasmine or oolong and "eyes of fish" for black tea. This is part of a poetic "language of tea" used to describe all stages of the tea procedure.

Throughout each session, pots and cups are constantly filled, emptied, left to stand and raised to the lips. There is a hypnotic quality to this ritual procedure, and it is easy to see why the properties of tea should first have been recognised by Buddhist monks, and why several varieties of tea are named for Chinese deities.

If all of this sounds too intimidating, visitors should be reminded that anyone who wishes simply to sit and enjoy a good cup of tea will feel perfectly at home. Of the huge range of teas available, opt for the house variety—a flavourful oolong called Beauty of the East. A great time to visit is on an evening when Singapore's poets and artists hold one of their regular get-togethers, turning the teahouse into a lively cultural scene.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RIAN LLOYD



The four major types of tea, above, result from how the leaves have been treated: black (roasted); green (sun dried); oolong (part roasted, part sundried); and jasmine (rolled among jasmine flowers).

□ Yixing Xuan Teahouse, 30/32 Tanjong Pagar Road, Singapore. Tel: 224 6961. Tea appreciation courses, in English and/or Mandarin, can run from 45 minutes to two or more hours. The teahouse also serves delicious biscuits or dim sum with the tea. Charming tea sets and unusual packets of tea are for sale.