



Tea house manager Vincent Low; teas and tea ceremony paraphernalia. Photography: Murray Simon



Pure pleasure

A Singapore tea house is a shrine to a rejuvenating brew.

epicure

Singapore

Visiting the Yixing Xuan Tea Art Centre on Neil Rd in Singapore's Chinatown is a relaxing and welcome distraction from the hustle and bustle of the city. Yixing Xuan is a tea artefact shop, teahouse and restaurant where you can experience the Chinese tea ceremony and learn about the different forms of tea.

Here tea is not only to be smelled, tasted, appreciated and drunk; it is also considered an essential element in Asian cooking as it is thought to break down fats and ease digestion.

I indulged in Timsum delicacies at Yixing Xuan, including tea-eggs, and chicken stuffed with tea and herbs and cooked in a broth that becomes a rejuvenating soup.

The shop sells a wide range of teas and accessories, but the tea appreciation lecture by manager Vincent Low is the major drawcard.

Vincent is a purist when it comes to tea.

He says there is only one tea plant. Teas made from flowers, given an artificial scent or made from herbs for medicinal purposes are not tea, he says — and tea bags are just bags of tea dust.

Vincent says there are only four types of tea: Oolong (Beauty of the East, Three Golden Leaves High Mountain Tea, Ti Kuan Yin and Siao Hong Pao), Black (Lapsang Souchong, Keemun), Green (Lung Ching, Pilo Chun) and Jasmine (Yinhao Xian Pian, Jasmine Pearl).

Jasmine tea is not considered a flower tea because it is made from Oolong tea-leaves.

The difference between a Chinese and a Japanese tea ceremony is that in Japan the emphasis is on the acting out of the ceremony while in Chinese society the emphasis is on the calm of the mind and the body and the flow of conversation — it is a social experience and a bridge for friendships. For tea appreciation, very tiny teapots are used along with small sniffing and tasting cups. Each batch of leaves can usually be brewed four to seven times, depending on leaf quality.

Vincent says there are six steps to the perfect Chinese tea brew for true appreciation:

1. The water should never be boiling; it is ready when the water first starts to simmer. Boiling water scalds the tea. Pour the hot water into the tiny teapot to clean and to warm it, which helps to enhance the colour, aroma and taste of the tea, then pour it out and rinse the teacups.
2. Place tea-leaves in the tiny pot. If you use curly leaves, they should fill two-thirds of the pot, rolled leaves should fill half-half and green tea-leaves a third.
3. Add hot water, and drain immediately. This cleans and opens the tea-leaves.
4. Add hot water again and leave for 30 seconds to a minute. Pour into a porcelain jug.
5. Transfer into tall sniffing cups, in which the tea's colour and fragrance can be appreciated.
6. Transfer again into small round teacups and drink it hot, savouring the fragrant aftertaste.

Vincent Low's free tea appreciation talk is 45 minutes long and is conducted Monday to Saturday at 11 am.

Lynda Rovis-Hermann

Yixing Yuan Teahouse, 30/32 Tanjong Pagar Rd, Singapore; 0011 65 2246961