

# OUR TEA STORY

COSMOPOLITAN SINGAPORE  
IS NOT JUST A CITY WHERE  
CULTURES COLLIDE TO  
PRODUCE GREAT FOOD – ITS  
HISTORY AND LOCATION  
ALSO MAKES FOR A PLACE  
OF VARIED FANTASTIC AND  
VARIED TEA EXPERIENCES

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## THE FIRST SIP IS A STRAWBERRY KISS, FRAGRANT AND SWEET.

The tiny porcelain teacup shudders tilts in my hand as I drain it with another draught. I'm sitting at a tea table at Phoenix Hill ([phoenixhill.com.sg](http://phoenixhill.com.sg)), a tea merchant in Joo Chiat, Singapore, where founder Julie Low has just served me the first infusion of Yang Mei Xiang ('strawberry fragrance') -, a Dan Cong or Phoenix Mountain oolong, famous for its ability to readily take on the aroma of fruits and flowers. Outside, the street is sticky and pregnant expectant-feeling with a storm on the way. Inside, the shop is cool and quiet except for the kettle, which has come to the boil again.

Low and her husband and co-founder Steven Lim are officially retired, but they've begun a second career as owners of Phoenix Hill, a tea plantation in Guangdong province, China, which they've brought to Singapore as a teashop. They became tea purveyors by accident, Lim explains. The pair worked in government trade around South-

East Asia and had retired to Singapore when they visited China in search of quality goose meat. On that trip, they met a Chinese man who had a tea plantation, and eventually invested in it.

The second infusion of Yang Mei Xiang feels thicker on the tongue, with the roasted notes from the charcoal-fired tea more prominent on the palate. If I hadn't seen Low brew it from the same leaves, I would have believed it was a different tea. It was the desire to share this kind of tea experience, showcasing tea's incredible versatility and range of flavour profiles, which brought the pair out of retirement.

Despite Singapore's location as the gateway to Asia, its tea culture is fairly immature, Low says, but its cosmopolitanism presents an opportunity. "The level of appreciation [from Chinese Singaporeans] is not that great because it's taken for granted, whereas for Caucasians, they look at it as really exciting and different. They're interested in finding out about the

growing, the processing and how to brew, which makes it more lively."

It's an interesting observation. Singapore is a melting pot of eastern and western cultures, but its tea-drinking is surprisingly disparate: Chinese tea shops are largely focused



### CHA TIME

Clockwise from right: Singapore's best tea egg at Bone Zen Mind; a visit to Phoenix Hill



**"Tea workshops are heavily subscribed. If someone has a public tea workshop it gets booked out very fast."**

around the Chinatown district, the British tea-drinking habits picked up during the colonial era manifest at afternoon tea in hotels and cafés, while the Malaysian/Indian way of enjoying their brand of strong, sweet, and milky brews seem to be confined to market stalls and kopitiams.

Tea blogger Melanie Lee, also known as Tea Lady Mel ([tealadymel.wordpress.com](http://tealadymel.wordpress.com)), says although the country comprises of these tea-drinking cultures, it doesn't change the fact that Singapore is a coffee country. "It's very fast-paced, people need their coffee more than they need tea," she notes. Ironically, however, it's coffee drinkers who are leading the trend towards specialty tea appreciation. "The community of people who enjoy tea is growing and often they are the coffee drinkers. If you get serious about coffee, you don't just want Starbucks, you want artisanal coffee and you become open to the nuances of other kinds of beverages: whiskey and wine and tea."

Wine and whiskey appreciation may be big, but while tea appreciation has yet to match their popularity, says Lee, she believes tea businesses are missing a trick because the demand for tea tastings and education is greater than the current supply. "Tea workshops are heavily subscribed. If someone has a public tea workshop it gets booked out very fast."

## AN AFTERNOON IN SINGAPORE

*Singapore is more than its shopping; step out of the mall and into a tearoom*

### TEA BONE ZEN MIND

This beautifully appointed terrace on Emerald Hill is a world away from the humid clamour of the city. Past the indoor koi pond and up the stairs is a series of different spaces — tatami-lined Japanese-themed areas, salon-style private booths and a light-filled modern western room — where you can enjoy a tea degustation featuring Singapore's best tea egg.

98 Emerald Hill Road; [teabone.com.sg](http://teabone.com.sg)

### T30 KUNGFU TEAHOUSE

Enter the teahouse and you've already left bustling Chinatown behind. T30 features do-it-yourself kungfu (gongfu) cha, perfect for the social tea-drinker who doesn't have the equipment at home but wants to share quality Chinese loose-leaf tea with friends in a comfortable, softly furnished setting.

30 Temple Street; [t30kungfuteahouse.com](http://t30kungfuteahouse.com)

*If western-style afternoon tea is more to your taste, all the top hotels offer a high tea service where you can sip your chosen brew and nibble on sweet and savoury treats.*

### THE TIFFIN ROOM AT RAFFLES

Offering the quintessential high tea experience amid charming colonial décor, The Tiffin Room should be on any tea-lovers must-visit list.

1 Beach Rd; [raffles.com/singapore](http://raffles.com/singapore)

### THE LOUNGE AT THE INTERCONTINENTAL

Where Asian flavours meet English tradition with the Peranakan High Tea based on Nyonya cuisine. 80 Middle Rd; [singapore.intercontinental.com](http://singapore.intercontinental.com)

### ANTI:DOTE AT FAIRMONT

Anti:dote wins the most stylish high tea award for its afternoon tea, which comes, not on a three-tiered stand, but in a three-drawer white leather jewellery box.

80 Bras Basah Rd, [antidotebar.com](http://antidotebar.com)





**TEA WITH THE QUEEN**  
Clockwise from top: Tea Chapter enjoyed a visit from the Queen in 1989; weighing in at Pek Sin Choon tea house

**“Guests really, really like it when they try a blend they cannot find anywhere else. We used to get calls like, ‘I drank this tea in my room, where can I buy it?’”**

The other aspect that Singapore’s tea industry may not yet understand is the potential global market that comes from its millions of visitors per year. Formerly employed at a tea wholesaler, Lee notes that hotels are expanding their tea range to differentiate themselves. “Guests really, really like it when they try a blend they cannot find anywhere else. We used to get calls like, ‘I drank this tea in my room, where can I buy it?’”

We finish our lunch at Café Pal, a Thai restaurant in Middle Road, with takeaway bubble tea. Its range of hot and cold loose-leaf tea is exceptional, in terms of quality and range, for a small eatery, but the cold blended stuff is a winner in this climate. “Bubble tea has a strong presence here. In that sense, tea will always be around,” Lee remarks.

**Eat, drink, be merry**

It is surprising that tea and food pairing isn’t more prominent here considering Singapore’s foodie status in the region. There are few places where tea and food are harmonised. Beyond the Hong Kong-style teahouses (where the tea is nothing special), and the lavish afternoon tea sets at the city’s top hotels, there

are few places where tea and food are paired.

One exception is Pek Sin Choon (peksinchoon.com), Singapore’s oldest continuing tea business, which recently celebrated its 90th anniversary.

Its headquarters sit open to Mosque Street, behind the hive of activity in the main part of Chinatown. Historical artefacts – an old weighing scale, sepia photographs of the company’s founder, ancient teapots – line the shelves over a cluttered, well-loved tea table.

Yuen Eng Wah, Pek Sin Choon’s assistant general manager, sits at the tea table slurping Wuyi rock tea, an oolong picked from trees that grow among the rocks of the Wuyi Mountains. The brand’s Unknown Fragrance oolong, a bittersweet blend of this and Anxi tea, has been designed to pair with *ba kut teh* (pork rib soup). He explains, “It’s a matching tea to make sure the taste doesn’t overwhelm. It also cuts grease,” he says. Pek Sin Choon now supplies to 80% of Singapore’s *ba kut teh* stalls, no mean feat considering it’s at five times the price of its competitors. Training the *ba kut teh* makers in food pairing made a huge difference, he adds. “It’s about balance and harmony. Having a specialised tea made the *ba kut teh* taste better.”

This principle is evident in the pairing choices at Tea Bone Zen Mind, where a tea degustation of six courses result in unusual combinations, such as crispy cuttlefish and onion rings paired with a cocktail of lemongrass, jasmine tea and rum sweetened with French rose syrup with crispy cuttlefish and onion rings. It works unexpectedly well: sweet and tangy meets salty crunch. My favourite pairing, however, is the pillowy mushroom, light and buttery like a savoury marshmallow, against the vegetal jade oolong: where the tea extracts the subtle earthiness of the fungus.

The journey to Tea Bone Zen Mind, located partway up Emerald Hill Road in a residential terrace house, is already a respite debrief from the city below. And if the neighbourhood doesn’t do it for you, the interior koi pond that greets you just inside the reception area will.

Unassuming from the outside, the teahouse’s soft grey palette, with touches of teak, white and glass, is a continent away from the wooden décor of Tea Chapter, a Singapore icon that boasts a visit from Queen Elizabeth II in 1989 (she drank Imperial Golden Cassia), the last teahouse I visited in Chinatown. While Tea Chapter is a long-term resident of busy Chinatown, Tea Bone Zen Mind sits in a quiet neighbourhood beyond the main shopping district of ION Orchard.

It is here, gazing out the window at the tree-lined street, that I read the future of tea in Singapore – the traditional and the modern side-by-side – in a teacup. ★



**TEA BREAKS**

**Take a tea break in other parts of Asia**

**THE YUNNAN BIKE JOURNEY**

Travellers cycle through a tea-infused landscape in Xishuangbanna, China, and will also have the opportunity to pick, process and press their own pu’er discs, as well as hand-make special pu’er paper to wrap their tea.

**Where:** Xishuangbanna, China (transfer from Kunming via Singapore, Hong Kong or Hangzhou)

**When:** 26 September to 4 October 2015

(2016 dates and costs are also available on the website)

**Price:** CNY9,500 (S\$2,092), land only [thehutong.com/yunnan-bike-journey](http://thehutong.com/yunnan-bike-journey)



**TEA-TOURING AFFAIR BY BIKE**

A day trip from Hanoi, Vietnam that takes travellers to meet tea farmers. You’ll get to pick and process some tea and also undertake take tea etiquette lessons, Vietnamese-style.

**Where:** Hanoi, Vietnam

**When:** Tour runs according to demand throughout the year, however harvesting occurs between May and October.

**Price:** Depends on group size. Per person, from US\$67 (S\$94) per person for a group of 10+ people, to US\$267 (S\$376) for one person.

[footprintsvietnam.com](http://footprintsvietnam.com)



**THE WAY OF TEA**

Take lessons in the Japanese tea ceremony, known as chado, ‘the way of tea’, at the official training institute, the ChadoUrasenkeTankokai in Kyoto, Japan.

**Where:** Kyoto, Japan

**When:** Check website for class schedule

**Price:** ¥700 (S\$8) for a beginner’s 1-hour class (1 hour) or ¥10,000 (S\$115) per semester for full training – (3 Saturdays a month for 3 semesters).

[urasenke.or.jp](http://urasenke.or.jp)

