

Food for Thought: Out of the Bag --- More Than a Drink, Tea Is Used as Tonic, Main Course, Dessert

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Tea has become much more than a mere beverage, though. It's an ingredient in its own right. Thanaruk Chuto, better known as Chef Pom, has an entire tea-based menu at the Bai Yun restaurant atop the Westin Banyan Tree Hotel in Bangkok. Chef Pom, who has been cooking in Thailand and Hong Kong for 25 years, uses tea to smoke not only duck -- a tradition in some parts of Asia -- but chicken and pigeon as well, and has also concocted a variety of tea marinades.

His baked spiced chicken comes with oolong tea leaves, while a marinated pigeon is smoked with jasmine tea. He prefers to use citrus flavored teas with seafood. He serves snow fish with tea leaves that add a dark bite to the white flesh.

Even before the resurgence, tea cooking was widespread in Asia -- from the tea soups in Japan to the eggs cooked in tea in Vietnam and a dish of pork and tuna prepared in lotus-flavored tea, also from Vietnam. The main advantage of tea as an ingredient, says Chef Pom, is that it balances oily foods and makes them seem less rich. After 10 hours in a tea marinade, lamb loses some of the odor that puts off many Asians and becomes more delicate and tender. His pork chop is marinated in papaya and tea, smoked with tea and then served with leaves of Ti Kuan Yin tea, an expensive and strongly flavored oolong. The leaves, which are soft from being boiled, add a hint of tannin to the sweet and slightly smokey chop.

FULL TEXT

Not long ago, a cup of tea was the easiest thing to order on any menu in the world. Now, you need a tea sommelier.

In restaurants these days, it's all about matching teas with foods. At the Lanesborough Hotel in London, it's lapsang souchong with egg sandwiches, Darjeeling with smoked salmon, Ceylon with cakes and pastries.

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Part of tea's new appeal is its health benefits, well known for centuries in Asia but little appreciated in the West until recently. A study at the University of Kansas has found that green tea is 100 times more effective as an antioxidant than vitamin C and 25 times better than vitamin E. Flavanoids in tea lower blood cholesterol and blood pressure and

reduce the risk of strokes, blood clots and heart attacks by as much as 44%, a Harvard University study found.

A cup of tea gives you 15% of the daily requirements of calcium, 10% of folic acid and 45% of manganese. And it's high in fluoride so it prevents tooth decay and seems to reduce plaque.

Restaurants are not only expanding their tea menus, they've turned the whole thing into performance art. Ask for tea at Heartbeat or Local, two new restaurants in New York City, and you will be presented with a tray containing dozens of dishes of dark leaves borne by the tea sommelier -- with the best Taiwanese Bao Jong oolong going for more than \$10 a pot. Some restaurants offer "dragon's eyeballs," tight balls of green tea that explode into extraordinary shapes when dropped in hot water.

The idea of a tea sommelier may be too precious to stomach in a world where we already have to put up with endless recitations of specials and menus that list the provenance of every vegetable and the parentage of any animal to be consumed. I can already picture sniffy tea sommeliers rolling their eyes and sighing when you make the faux pas of ordering the lapsang rather than the oolong. But inevitably some of the more ludicrous aspects of connoisseurship were bound to accompany the resurgence of tea in the past decade.

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Tea flavoring in your food is one thing. Eating whole tea leaves is another. In fact, it's a very unusual experience. Thailand and Burma have long histories of tea-based dishes. In northern Thailand, steamed tea is rolled into balls and eaten with salt, oil, garlic, pork fat and dried fish as a high-energy food.

In Burma, lephet, a salad of slightly fermented leaves, is a prized dish served at the end of meals. To make lephet, young tea leaves are steamed and then pressed into bamboo stems which are then buried in the ground. This is often done near a river to ensure that the temperature remains constant. Once fermented, the leaves are taken out and served with sesame seeds, garlic, salt and other ingredients including fried beans and roasted peanuts.

Lephet is often presented in ornate lacquer containers or, at the royal court, in silver salvers. Coming after a meal, it clears the palate and, because of the caffeine in the leaves, acts as a stimulant.

If garlic and tea leaves is not your idea of dessert, you have a host of other choices. Green tea ice cream has been the inspiration for a range of tea-flavored sorbets and other frozen desserts. Jester, a restaurant at the Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok, serves three small pots of creme brulee, each flavored with different teas. It's a great idea as the tannin takes the edge off the sweetness and adds to the caramel flavor of the burned sugar.

Somehow, though, I doubt you get many of the health benefits of those flavonoids when they come wrapped in cream, eggs and sugar.

Drink It, Eat It
Bai Yun, the Westin Banyan Tree Bangkok, 21/100 South Sathorn Road, Bangkok. Tel: (66-2) 679-1200. Not all the tea dishes are available at any time at Bai Yun and they were not on the lunchtime dim sum menu.
Jesters, Peninsula Hotel. 333 Charoennakorn Road, Klongsan, Bangkok. Tel: (66-2) 861-2888. Pacific Rim food.
Heartbeat, W Hotel, 149 East 49th Street, New York. (At Lexington Avenue.) Tel: (212) 407-2900. Spa food.
Local, 224 West 47th Street, New York. (Between Broadway and Eighth avenues.) Tel: (212) 921-2005. Contemporary American food.

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