

## *Lock Cha Tea House*



Air is heavy and heated and there is a rare break in the June rain, and it is a break of just hours. I am amidst Hong Kong speed - its every-single-day-speed – and I move amidst its controlled waves with a thirst. It is close to lunch hour, and this ‘speed’ is massive increase in tempo from that which I am accustomed.

Young children in white school uniforms cruise by in groups, immune and perhaps used to the heat. Miss Tsao and her controlled steps are escorting me towards a place of tea. She negotiates heat, bodies, and heated asphalt with competence and verve. I slightly stagger towards what I’m hoping will be a sanctuary.

My destination is one of Hong Kong’s oldest remaining buildings, which houses the more specific purpose of my journey: the Lock Cha Tea House in the Shatin district of Hong Kong. Just above the financial district with its adjoining hub of fashion and suits and its immaculate kind of mania, it reigns as something beyond simply an air-conditioned retreat. Its sign states in smaller letters to the side “Fine teas and tea wares. Dim sum and veg dining” ... and that is it. An institution that has happily withstood the frenetic pace of ‘restorative’ and often destructive advances in a city that has perfected speed. It stands proudly and cleanly announcing itself and there is a little feeling of relief as though some small part of me wasn’t expecting it to

actually still remain standing. As much as I need it for my thirst, I need it to be there just to satisfy my need for something slightly (if only slightly) timeless.

Entering into any building at this 'heated' time of year in Hong Kong is at times for me like walking into a soft cold wall, as the air conditioning seems to simply erupt from the interiors of structures and happily encase the body. Miss Tsao and I walk straight in from gray heat into a cool frantic vault of colors, movement, and thankfully a wall of tea. All is well as I veer left to a small wooden counter, behind which is a series of bags and drawers stuffed with various teas. The bodies of serving staff are already swishing around dashing around efficiently.

My tea comrade on this journey has kindly joined me to take tea, and proudly show an institution and a soft mecca of cool peace within the bustle of a city that rarely slows. She has come to share the leaves and share time in a place where time is beyond rare.

There are only couple of tables free and we install ourselves at one of those Asian hardwood tables that are more like institutions than furniture. It looks to have been created and installed in another time, when furniture was made to last five centuries, rather than simply adorning a corner of a room. Just seeing it in its state of happy solidity is pleasing and shortly, there will be tea upon it.

The word "Lock" means fortune or happiness and the spirit of the place isn't so much a place of tea perfection and minute detail as it is a place that brings together the essentials of the tea philosophy: people, ease of communication, peace, and some tea. Lock Cha is meant to hint at something beyond simply taking tea, it seems to point at the necessity of friendship, peace, and harmony when taking Asia's eternal green commodity.

Miss Tsao is pointing hurriedly at the menu as she has already an imprint of what we will be ordering. "And we will finish with this..." her finger points to something on the food menu that I cannot quite see. My eyes are tuned into a tea menu as it is tea that is required in short order. Only a few teas are on offer on the menu, but I know that there is a sumptuous bevy of teas available for sale both here and for export.

Hong Kong teahouses in the late 1980's and early 90's were largely made up of teas that had been imported as base teas and then re-roasted, manipulated, flavored, and restored into different teas. The teas were in fact recreated teas with almost nothing left of its former selves. In fact many in Hong Kong will admit to not ever knowing what a pure tea tasted like as the city was a bastion of 'kitchens' which manipulated the base products and of sorts where all sorts of tea treatment was conducted. Lock Cha and its founder Ip Wing-chi sought to throw a surprisingly simple curve into the Hong Kong tea community by sourcing directly from tea gardens in China. Then, rather than manipulating, simplifying and simply destroying the teas, Lock Cha

served the teas as they were. Fresh, pungent, dark, and complex teas came from fields and factories direct

Miss Tsao before me has a look of rapture on her face. Food, its preparation, its absorption and ultimately its complete simplicity is a daily obsession in this city of thousands of restaurants. There is an expectation here that one can only find in a few select cities of gastro-obsessive's. It has been built into the hardwires of people and like any proud takers of food, they will not tolerate sub-standards when the expectation and palates are educated. While the food menu has such divine and succulent plates as roasted pickled bean curd skin, fried lotus flower cakes, and steamed vegetable dumplings, the tea menu is refreshingly simple and uncluttered. Qimen Red, an Anhui Yellow, my Four Season Oolong, and a few other classic teas, which don't stretch the imagination to much. It is refreshing because it is often the trend of teahouses to offer an impossible array of teas that must sit stagnant (often for years) lying in wait and hope that someone will finally order it. Here it is a stated policy that only a certain amount of teas will be on offer, and those teas will only be fresh.

A younger server in blue swerves past and lays out our first order of the day, tea. My own order is a powerful Oolong that sits basking in a flared cup. Served in a prepared quantity it is placed in front of me, the lid is opened and a first infusion is poured. Her own tea, a single estate Fujian green is a reckless looking stain of green leaves within her own flared tea cup. Here the 'art' is taken out of the equation and all is simply done for you. Our server also arrives with a kettle of boiled water which will fuel our flared cups. It is placed on a kind of side table close by. Miss Tsao has ordered a bean curd skin with a light oil and vinegar with some spicy chilly.

The only responsibility we have with regards to our tea is to decide upon how long to infuse the tea. But before too many milliseconds pass I'm being told quite directly to "eat" by the diminutive Miss Tsao who has opened up proceedings with gusto.

Around the restaurant has chattily filled up in quick time. There isn't one free table as the place has swelled with ranks of the business community, a table of monks, and those who'd simply rather dine and drink out than remain in.

Tea is served at every table with each individual receiving their very own tea serving cup and drinking cup. The numbers and Miss Tsao's assurance that "every lunch hour is a packed house", back up Lock Cha's informal philosophy of simple untainted teas consumed simply, and at all times.

My own Oolong is fresh and I allow the infusion time to run on a bit longer than perhaps wise, but I want the tea to burst in the mouth and 'bite'. It does bite with all of the fresh drive of a train. Small dishes arrive rapidly and another informal philosophy of Lock Cha is made clear: tea time is all the time. During, before, after, and simultaneously, tea is infused and sipped. Again some inherent smarts are on

display here as the tea house doesn't simply do ceremony; it does lunch, it does healthy, and of course, it does tea.

Miss Tsao has a running commentary of the various tiny plates that arrive. Here the idea of dim sum has been fused with tea, and added to that an intimation of Buddhist-veg dining. Small, healthy amounts of freshly produced foods and taken with tea in a clean modern setting. Tea and its taking brought into the modern age while retaining its old charms.

"Lock" or fortune, has been blended with some keen business savvy in downtown Hong Kong and in the slightly declining world of tea houses in Asia, savvy counts large.



*Lock Cha teahouse in full noontime swing, with the impressive tea collection behind the counter.*

*Lock Cha is about doing meals with tea and they aren't embarrassed to admit it.*







*Food, tea, time, and chat are brought together seamlessly and unpretentiously in Lock Cha. The result works... even for tea enthusiasts.*

*As much a teahouse, Lock Cha is an alternative place to take lunch and chat for those who work in Hong Kong's hub.*



*Tea rests in containers at the front desk, along with a statue (left) of Guanying, the Goddess of Mercy.*