

Master Cheng: The Man of the Song Tea

A Hong Kong original opens his vaunted doors and prepares an ancient tea



Legends often have that quality of being in plain site, of being unremarkable in almost every possible way....that is until one meets them and is treated to exactly why the legend is in fact legendary. Whether it be a performance, an ability, or simply because they are something unique, singular, and charismatic these legends do still remain often in their own little realms.

Fresh off of a 16-hour flight and arriving to green torrents of rain from above, Hong Kong's New Territories seems like wet streaks of road and grey skies of which I see through a film of humidity. I'm on my way to an appointment with a legend of the tea world; a legend who doesn't simply run a tea shop and wax eloquently about tea, or grow the tea trees. Cheng Yu Hung is a man that one must 'reserve' time to see and a man that not simply anyone can see, meet, or drink with. It isn't that he is snobby, or an elitist, but rather because like legends the world over, he isn't always in the mood to be appreciated nor I suspect does he actually want to see just anyone. I'm honoured that this is even happening, though I feel jet-lag like a cement weight in the mind and the need for tea is upon me in a huge way.

My guide Miss Tsao knows our resident master and is one of a few who has been a guest to Master Cheng's creative masterpiece sessions and passions as they relate to tea. She is in so many ways the necessary link and these legends all need their links to the outside world.

Arriving to a small lane off of Sham Hong Road, I am a soggy, blurry-eyed mess who needs a jolt of tea to convince the body that it isn't jet-lagged at all. We are expected and the door to Master Cheng's shop is open in the humid air. Rain continues to pound and we arrive under dark skies just before the manic dinner hour (which in Hong Kong takes 'intense' into a new direction, so frantic it is). This is perhaps not the time to need a dose of bitter green given that we are about to meet a master, but there is little concern as what better way to sate a thirst than with a master?

It doesn't take long to find, and Miss Tsao is a blur as she races out of the rain to the sliding glass door and disappears inside. Two shops wide the Cheng Kee Store is nothing less than a colorful chaos of the very highest and most wonderful order. Buddhist chanting music is cranked so loud that the very idea of savoring the smooth relaxing mantras has been blown away by sheer volume. But, there in the flesh, tilted backwards on a wide wooden chair with a thatch of thick hair is the master himself. Master Cheng has a nickname, "Samadhi Tea Man" – Samadhi being the feeling of completely clear consciousness that comes after a meditation. I quickly reinterpret this as a clarity that comes with huge amounts of tea, served well, and served often.

Getting up he limps over and shakes hands and welcomes me in slow English and then in slow Mandarin and then in rapid fire Cantonese which almost shakes the room with its power. The stereo is thankfully turned down while I can sit back at a massive wooden tea table to take stock of this entirely eclectic shop of items that go far beyond tea. Buddhist icons, coffee, wooden oboes, a back room of gas fired stove tops, hordes of tea and a series of slightly glitzy lights all add to the splash sense that a being of intense and disjointed tastes resides here.

What Master Cheng is known for is what I like to refer to as a bit of the 'darker arts of tea', in other words he is an alchemist rather than a performer. Rather than being obsessed with simply the tea, the vintage, the name, etc, Master Cheng is singularly obsessed with the process by which a tea is prepared. Within minutes he is in full cry about tea's lost arts, the skills and the passion. His voice is a rakish throaty noise of power and conviction as it comes out of his mouth. His children – apart from one son – have no interest in tea or even what their father does with tea and he seems very aware that what he does and represents is on the very edge of becoming extinct.

Master Cheng asks point-blank what kind of tea I prefer and Miss Tsao once again reminds me of this unique aspect of our host, telling me that, "He prepares the tea leaves – any tea leaves – in the manner that was popular in the Song Dynasty". During the creative Song Dynasty (960-1279) tea innovation, creativity, and

experimentation blossomed, and powdered tea (the origin of Japanese ma'cha powdered tea traditions) became an art of sorts called 'dian cha'. In the Song Dynasty it wasn't so much about 'where' a tea might be from as it was a case of 'how' the tea was prepared.

While we sit, the odd customer comes in to purchase items. Usually they are friends of our Master Cheng but he isn't really interested in the business of running a shop on this day. What is clear is that this dynamic man with hair and a throaty voice has a love of speaking about tea and about the forgotten methods of actually preparing the powdered tea. Forces that have nothing to do with profit move him, he is moved by an ideal of his own that is inspired by the past.

Master Cheng beckons me to join him as he asks me to choose a tea from his collection. I've chosen a roasted Oolong. Carefully he measures out three portions of 8 grams each of the loose-leaf tea.

His little counter of tools, utensils and tea gear is neat in an untidy and personalized way. A gas burner sits where it can be used without fuss. Atop the burner sits a heavy walled copper pot, and beside that a huge cloth strainer sits like a fishing net awaiting inevitable instructions. Looking over while he sets out a couple of portions of Oolong Mr. Cheng tells me that he prefers white teas to all others.

In the Song Dynasty – a dynasty the Master Cheng openly praises and reveres – there was a great marriage of the practical and the artistic elements of tea culture and white teas in particular were promoted. It is in many ways as though this man and his appreciation of tea culture are a throwback to another time.

During this golden Song Dynasty, steaming (rather than frying) became the preferred method of fixing a tea's taste after being plucked. After being dried the tea was then mashed and ground into powder that then was whisked (using the very same whisk that would ultimately find its ultimate expression in Japan) in wide bowls (another tradition that would be eternally preserved in Japanese tea culture). This method would become known as the Song tea ceremony and it was this ceremony and style that Japanese monks studying in China would take home to Japan – and perhaps ironically end up preserving long after the tradition had almost disappeared in China.

After Master Cheng has the portions ready, he puts them into three bowls and proceeds to grind them using a hand-constructed mortar of copper. A smile appears on his face and it might be related to the fact that by grinding the tea leaves to a crushed powder he is in some ways changing the very character of the tea. His face with its hair and a large malleable head look somehow godly. This could be any divine artist anywhere preparing himself for an onslaught of pleasure...he needs no audience but the audience is appreciated because it appreciates his efforts.

Miss Tsao and her energy are bouncing around excitedly. She is bound to this most informal of ceremonies just as I am. I am bound to this man whose passionate reverence of something of the past is so present and so tangible. It is beyond anything monetary or pretentious...it is about a belief and maintaining a belief.

Once the ground tea leaves (he almost shouts as he tells me that any tea can be produced this way) are ready, he starts up the little gas burner and begins to heat water in a thick copper pot. Simultaneously another little gas burner is set alight and an empty pot is placed on it upside down so as to heat the inside surface. This will be to 'roast' or flavor the broken tea leaves. Breaking leaves releases flavors and essences more quickly and Master Cheng, after rinsing the bowl with some hot water, allows me to sample a couple of heaving wafts into my nostrils. Its scent is powerful and narcotic.

Master Cheng is a study of concentration as he focuses on the first addition of water – a mere hint of it – to the wide ceramic bowl. When about a half of the bowl is immersed in the water with the ground tea leaves floating happily our host grabs a nearby whisk (the very same that is used for the Japanese ma'cha ceremony) and gives the whole concoction some heavy action whipping the contents for about a minute. The resultant mix, which is briefly frothy, is ready for consumption and I'm generously served first and heave back a monster sip of the Oolong, that has been transformed into an Oolong with a difference.

Like any chef or creator the world over, Master Cheng's face and more particularly his eyes were in a look of expectation and almost rapture. It didn't feel as though it was an expectation that I should necessarily 'like' the tea but rather that I'd 'feel' how it was different. And different it was!

Its strength from the first touch of fluid in the mouth was like a force. From the first wafts that hit the nostrils it was a force. From the first bite as the Oolong – normally controlled in its strength – unleashed itself into the mouth cavity and over the gums and teeth it was force. A force created by a force himself.

Outside the rain continued its noisy drive into the asphalt and it in turn released its own vapors and created its own flavors of hot stone and must.

Master Cheng with his own bowl and with him, Miss Tsao finally both join me in sipping. We sit at the huge wooden table which forms the center-piece of his entire shop.

A second even more potent bowl and then a third – all from the original three bowls of tea leaves that he had ground up – all were consumed infusing our blood streams with the kick - that I in particular - needed.

As we sipped Master Cheng unleashed more and more of his philosophy and own life-story. The son of two mainland parents, and whose father was a dedicatee of the

green leaf, Cheng had dug into tea's very soul reading everything about tea and its preparation. He had become an advocate of the Song method of powdered tea as he thought it "most quickly and purely represented the essence of tea".

Finishing off our third round of tea Master Cheng begins anew with another kind of tea – this a Puerh – prepared in the same manner. At one point of preparation a man walks in off the street and is greeted by Cheng. "My brother", Cheng tells me. The same tell-tale hair on a taller frame, this is a larger less animated version of his brother, Master Cheng. Speaking about tea, he tells us that he doesn't (cannot) share the same intensity of purpose for tea as his brother, though he acknowledges his brother's special mentality and special efforts to keep alive something special and timeless in a world that values the 'brief'.

Sipping his own tea he quietly reflects that such efforts are "necessary in all spheres of life".

With that yet another tea is plunked in front of us. Efforts on this day at least, are marvelously appreciated.



Wringing our flavour and tea out of a cloth bag which acts as a filter in Master Cheng's classic powdered tea, tea.



The color of Master Cheng's tea is deep and the taste is potent as the powder imparts its strength and nature much more quickly than a whole leaf or rolled leaf.



The precious step of weighing out the tea leaves on a scale.



Master Cheng grinds the whole dry leaves into a fine broken powder using a mortar and pestle.



The Master waxes eloquent while preparing one of his masterpieces.