

“It sounds weird — and it sounds weird — but if you slurp it, you’ll get better flavor,” the server said as he arranged a flight of four teas before me. I glanced around the busy tasting room of Steven Smith Teamaker. Everyone else was delicately sipping their brews, so I slurped surreptitiously.

I was in Oregon, at the end of a whistle-stop tour of some of Portland’s best-known teahouses. Although Stumptown seems to revolve around coffee, it is also a city of tea — from quiet cafes to larger retail operations. Its local businesses have cast a leafy influence on American tea culture, ushering in a new era of specialized quaffing. My informal tally counts roughly two dozen teahouses, plus several tea supply shops and breweries.

The city even celebrates its tea community with Tea Fest PDX, which was held this year on July 21. The day-long festival brings together enthusiasts and vendors for workshops, classes, musical performances, yoga and more.

On a stereotypically drizzly Portland morning, I dodged the drops to reach the Tao of Tea, a two-story teahouse in downtown’s Lan Su Chinese Garden. The company has two local teahouses, a retail store and a microbrewery that bottles teas for national distribution. One of the first U.S. tea companies to join the fair trade movement, it also takes pride in using organic teas and traditional tea-making methods.

The teahouse was serene, with only a few other customers. I chose a table near windows overlooking the garden’s courtyard and lake. In front of me, a server demonstrated a traditional gong fu tea ceremony. I had selected a fermented pu-erh (or Pu’er) variety — named for the city in China — which she had recommended as being “particularly forgiving,” a nod to my beginner status.

“How many years do you think have people been drinking tea?” she asked. I guessed 2,000, but was off by millennia. “Five thousand,” she said.

She arranged a few accoutrements — teapot, tiny cups and bamboo tools — on a tray while explaining the process. After flash-steeping the tea to remove tannins, she placed some leaves in my teacup to steep. Then I was on my own.

Although my hands lacked her steadiness, three minutes later I was sipping the strong, earthy pu-erh and nibbling my accompanying snacks: spicy steamed tofu and candied mango slices topped with coconut flakes and goji berries. I poured cup after steaming cup while watching passersby enjoy the rainy garden.

Jasmine Pearl’s airy flagship teahouse sits across the Willamette River in Portland’s Northeast neighborhood. The company supplies teas, including 50-plus organic varieties, to more than 500 retailers nationwide. The teahouse’s long stone counter and attractive tables arrayed with tea merchandise awaited the half-dozen or so customers browsing during my visit.

Dozens of loose-leaf teas are available for easy sniffing, and its menu includes tea lattes and sparkling teas. A sign lists classes and events, such as an introduction to tea-leaf reading and a demonstration of a Japanese tea ceremony.

I was jittery from the pu-erh, so I chose a non-caffeinated Earl Grey rooibos, the citrusy bergamot tempered with steamed almond milk. I also bought a vegan caramel brownie — to go.

Further south, customers enter the Sellwood location of Tea Chai Té through a deceptively diminutive train caboose, which opens up into a lofty, spacious teahouse. The caboose, dating to 1920, might look familiar to “Portland-

Teatime in a coffee town

In Oregon, Portland has plenty of room for hot-beverage competition

BY ERIN E. WILLIAMS



PHOTOS BY ERIN E. WILLIAMS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In Portland, Ore., the two-story Tao of Tea can be found downtown in the Lan Su Chinese Garden. Jasmine Pearl’s flagship teahouse, across the Willamette River in Portland’s Northeast neighborhood, has more than 50 organic varieties. At Steven Smith Teamaker’s sprawling Southeast Tasting Room in the Central Eastside neighborhood, visitors who sit at the coffee bar get a peek into its tea-production facility and lab. Each cup in a flight of tea there comes with an explanatory card.

ia” watchers; the series featured it in its second through fourth seasons. In keeping with its hipster cred, Tea Chai Té offers kombucha on tap. Mason jar chandeliers, mismatched rustic wood tables and a cozy outdoor seating area reinforce the aesthetic.

I was overwhelmed by the menu’s 120 scratch-made tea blends, including fair trade and organic (75) options, so the woman behind the counter recommended a light-tasting white peach tea. I settled into a table next to a miniature library, sipped my drink and tucked a similarly peachy kombucha bottle into my bag for later.

The next morning, I was ready for two final heavy hitters. First up: the light-filled flagship location of Townshend’s Tea Company on gallery-lined Alberta Street. Local photographers’ art hung on the walls, and the menu offered a stunning variety of tea: white, green, black, oolong, pu-erh, chai, rooibos, yerba mate and herbal. I ordered a mammoth teapot of minty organic Highland Chai, sweet with coconut milk. I also refilled my 32-ounce mini-growler with an oaky kombucha from the tap — Townshend’s distributes its organic, raw (and wind-powered) bottled kombucha throughout the United States and Canada — and purchased three ounces of vanilla rooibos loose-leaf for home.

A cluster of tables, a comfortable couch and an outdoor garden accommodate an equal mix of out-of-towners and regulars who have made Townshend’s their workspace. Many customers come from nearby Concordia University.

“Our bubble tea is a big hit with students,” the barista explained. Townshend’s was tweaking its bubble tea ingredients to make them healthier, he added, and invited me to a tasting at the Montavilla location.

“Especially here in Portland, people care about what they eat. We want them to have options,” he said.

Near the river, Steven Smith Teamaker’s sprawling Southeast Tasting Room is housed in a 13,000-square-foot warehouse space in the Central Eastside neighborhood. High ceilings, cement floors and glass garage doors frame the communal wooden tables and provide an industrial ambiance that reflects the neighborhood.

The server brought me a flight of four teas, arranged from green to black to herbal — and made that slurping recommendation. I sniffed the dry leaves and read the informational cards that accompanied each variety. The flight represented a fraction of the menu’s 50-plus varieties from India, Africa, China, Sri Lanka and other locales.

Behind the counter, another room houses production, blending and packing. A recipe-testing lab also adjoins the tearoom. During my visit, several executives were sampling new summer teas on tap.

Steven Smith was a Portland native who co-founded two of the city’s biggest names, Stash and Tazo. In 2009, Smith and his wife, Kim DeMent, launched Steven Smith Teamaker in Northwest Portland.

Smith died in 2015, but his entrepreneurship and palate helped usher in a new era of specialty tea appreciation in the United States. That influence is just one of the ways that Portland’s tea culture continues to reinvent and transform the way that we experience brews from pu-erh to kombucha — in Stumptown and beyond.

travel@washpost.com

Williams is a writer based in Nevada. Her website is erinewilliams.com.

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Steven Smith Teamaker
1626 NW Thurman St.;
110 SE Washington St.
971-254-3935
smithtea.com

The original Smith Tasting Room is located in Northwest Portland. The 13,000-square-foot Southeast Tasting Room also houses production and a tea lab. Both locations offer more than 50 teas, including seasonal and nitro choices on tap, as well as classes and workshops. Teas from \$3.

The Tao of Tea

3430 SE Belmont St.;
239 NW Everett St.
503-736-0119
taooftea.com

The original teahouse — and Portland’s oldest — adjoins a retail store in Southeast Portland. The Tower of Cosmic Reflections teahouse is located in the Lan Su

Chinese Garden. (Customers must pay \$10 for admission to the garden.) Menus feature more than 100 teas from \$3.50.

Jasmine Pearl

724 NE 22nd Ave.
503-236-3539
thejasminepearl.com

The menu includes sparkling teas, tea lattes and brewed teas. The shop also carries a wide variety of tea merchandise and offers classes. Teas from \$2.75.

Tea Chai Té

Three Portland locations
503-432-8747 (Sellwood location)
teachaitte.com

The Sellwood location is a caboose featured in “Portlandia.” The menu includes more than 100 handcrafted teas, boba and kombucha on tap. Teas from \$2.50.

Townshend’s Tea Company

Four Portland locations
503-445-6699 (Alberta Street



Among the accoutrements — teapot, tiny cups and bamboo tools — a server begins the gong fu ceremony at Tao of Tea.

location)

townshendstea.com

A Portland-based chain (with additional locations in Oregon, Montana and Utah) featuring dozens of teas and kombucha on

tap, as well as classes. Teas from \$2.50.

INFORMATION

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E.W.