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Perfect Teas for Dining

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Most people wouldn't think of matching food and beverage beyond the classic wine pairing of wine with a meat or seafood meal. But just as a good food-and-wine combination can enhance a meal, choosing the right tea can add a new dimension to the dining experience.

"When you talk about [food]pairing, people always talk about Western [pairing]," says Linda Loke, director of Si Chuan Dou Hua, a restaurant chain with three branches in Singapore that serves Sichuan cuisine.

Loke continues: "But what about Chinese? So we started thinking if there's any way to pair food with Chinese tea."



Tian Fu Tea Room at Parkroyal on Beach Road. (Photo: Si Chuan Dou Hua)

Thus, Tian Fu Tea Room was born. First established in 2005, the teaohouse blossomed from a desire to expand the culture of tea in Singapore, and now sits within the Si Chuan Dou Hua restaurants.

Initially, few were interested in Chinese tea pairing. A decade later, there's an increasing interest in tea and food pairing with Loke even getting requests from diners at Si Chuan Dou Hua to create tea pairing meals for them.

"We have guests who say to me, 'Linda, plan the menu for me'. We usually will pair two types of tea, out of six or seven courses. We do that very often."

The exploration of the flavours and aromas between food and tea is fascinating. Though it is not an exact science, there are general rules when it comes to whipping up a match — lighter brews typically go with delicate food, and stronger ones with heavier food.

Art of tea pairing

The art of tea pairing is a serious affair at Tian Fu Tea Room. Its Imperial High Tea menu boasts three sets of delicately handcrafted dim sum and a signature dessert, where each set is paired with a brew specifically picked out. The result is a rewarding experience that draws on the perfect match between the exceptional culinary skills of the chefs and the extensive knowledge of the tea experts.

"[Tea pairing] makes a lot of difference," says Loke. "We recommend having steamed dim sum with green tea, yellow tea, or white tea because we don't want the flavours of the tea to overpower the freshness of the food."

Pairings can also be made according to the benefits of the tea. "When it comes to deep-fried items or spicy items we always recommend some red tea or black tea," says Loke.

For example Pu Erh, which is a black tea, is best matched with deep-fried food because it helps to cut the oiliness and aids in digestion.

The Imperial High Tea menu changes each month so guests can experience different pairings, and the items also differ between each outlet to give diners more choices.

A visit to the Tian Fu Tea Room at the 60th floor of UOB plaza this month not only offers a spectacular view of the central business district, but a refreshing dim sum fare that will delight the senses as well.



A tea expert brewing Pu Erh at Tian Fu Tea Room at UOB Plaza. (Photo: Si Nur Mas Lina, Premier)



The steamed Golden Fish Dumpling with Bird's Nest is best matched with lighter teas such as the Huang Shan Mao Feng. (Photo: Si Nur Mas Lina, Premier)

Steamed items such as the Golden Fish Dumpling with Bird's Nest are served with Huang Shan Mao Feng, a type of green tea that is grown in the Anhui province of China. A bite of the dumpling, followed by a sip of the tea, allows a complementary blend of flavours that don't override one another.

Food with robust flavours such as the Crispy Prawn Spring Roll with Wasabi are matched with Lychee Red Tea. Savour the red tea after your first nibble of the spring roll, and switch to the green tea on the second. You will find that with the red tea, both flavours of the food and the brew are retained; with the green tea, however, there is a bitter aftertaste.

Rich culture in a cup

A high tea meal at Tian Fu Tea Room is also a foray into tea culture.

The tea experts are always happy to share their knowledge of the different brews and make suggestions. Guests are also encouraged to try their hand at brewing their own tea. Even the cups used are not left to chance.

"When we plan the menu, besides deciding which tea will go well with which food, we also try to serve the teas in different types of cups," Loke reveals. This is to let diners experience the various ways of drinking tea.

Huang Shan Mao Feng is served in gaiwan, a dainty Chinese cup with matching saucer and lid that is most suitable for teas with delicate flavours.

According to Loke, the traditional way for ladies to hold the gaiwan is to grip the saucer between the thumb and the middle finger. Single ladies will stick their pinky out to signal their availability.

Blending tea culture with traditional festivals, Tian Fu Tea Room is celebrating the Lunar New Year with a Reunion Imperial High Tea from February 18 to March 5. There is nothing more customary than the *yu sheng*, a yearly toss to mark the New Year, and the highlight of the menu.

Other auspicious food includes Fried Rice with Waxed Meat and traditional rice cakes, which will be paired with premium Chinese brews.

The journey to discover the perfect marriage of flavours is a fruitful one. And once you find the right match, you can never look at tea the same way again.

Si Chuan Dou Hua's Tian Fu Tea Room branches: Parkroyal on Beach Road, Parkroyal on Kitchener Road, and UOB Plaza.



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