



West China Tea House sits slightly off of 7th Street in Austin, Texas. The company relocated a few months ago after expansion of Interstate 35 displaced them. Photo by Vivien Ayers.

HEADLINE: ‘That’s the nature of tea’: West China Tea House pours steaming cups, welcomes all patrons through its door

So-Han Fan starts tea service at West China Tea House the same way a person who has spent decades mastering the art and techniques of a field does — by laying out the tools of his craft.

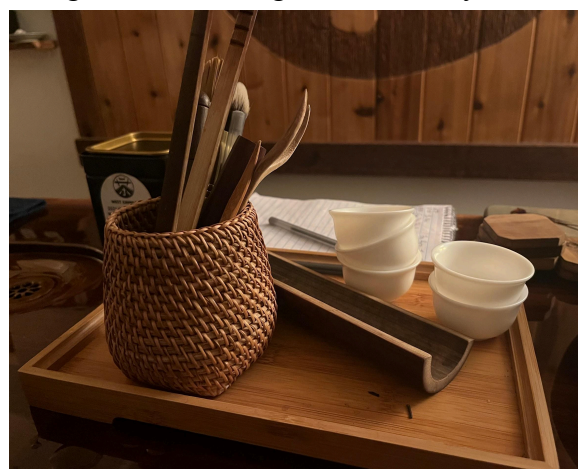
Water boiled in a stainless steel kettle sits to the side of a slightly sunken drainage area on a sleek bar. The counter, handcrafted by a local artisan specializing in woodcraft, rests at the perfect level for chairs to be pulled up around it. Vines of propagated foliage in clay vases cascade to the floor, framing the shelves holding dozens of authentic Chinese teas.

After choosing a tea, Fan puts a couple of pinches of dry leaves into a wooden tray that is slightly curved at the edges but open at the ends, forming a boat-like container. It’s passed around the table for drinkers to absorb the notes of the tea in an olfactory way, with only one direction — inhale over the leaves, exhale to the side and recognize the undercurrents of flavor hiding under the dry scent of nature.

“You have got to waft it like you’re back in chemistry class,” a customer said to his neighbor, a newcomer to the tea house, prompting laughter from the group clustered around the bar.

Fan started the business a decade ago in Austin, Texas, and though it's not at its original location, the promise of serving authentic Chinese tea it made back then has not been broken. While the building's white storefront with exposed wood beams on 7th Street looks unassuming, especially compared to the restaurants and bars that line West Sixth Street behind it, the goods it offers behind its wooden door are unlike any other found along that section of road. It beckons patrons in, welcoming them into an atmosphere warm and inviting with its message of inclusivity.

While the dry leaves are passed around, Fan pours the boiling water over the small bowl-like teapot, called a gaiwan, and the drinking vessels to warm them up. While the standard glasses the tea house uses are a white porcelain, many guests bring their own cups to use, from pink glazed clay to hewn rock.



Clean tools and cups sit on the bar, waiting to be distributed out to customers. Off to the left, containers of the tea leaves wait to be selected and brewed. Photo by Vivien Ayers.

Fan removes the water from the gaiwan, only to add the dry leaves. He puts the lid on slightly askew with a slight opening on one side. It only takes a few seconds, but he immediately dumps the liquid out. This steep is not for consumption, but to wake the tea up.

“Tea fills an important social niche in American society that's not currently filled, which is the need for non-alcohol-based recreation, which is filled by coffee,” Fan said. “But coffee, it's certainly not alcohol, but it's not necessarily as social of an activity because you can go to a coffee shop and get your cup of coffee and sit in the corner by yourself and not talk to anybody.”

Once the tea is awoken, more hot water is added for a proper steep. The brewed tea is poured into a small glass pitcher a minute or so later to distribute the tea between the cups. The cycle repeats, with the tea repeatedly steeped until the tea leaves lose their potency. This technique of brewing tea creates batches of concentrated strong teas instead of one big steeping that dilutes its taste.

It's the style of Gong Fu Cha — the Chinese art of serving tea.

Conversation ebbs and flows as Fan works, with service never once interrupting it. The natural way of serving is silent, with little to no questions or responses besides requests of what tea to

drink next. The tea house's rhythm creates a welcoming atmosphere that invites people to sit down, relax and chat, whether it be with strangers or people they visited the tea house with.

“You go to the U.K. and it's tea time and everyone gets together for tea time,” Fan said. “You go to Morocco and you go to get together for tea time. You go to India, they get together for tea time. Turkey people get together for tea time. That's what tea is part of — that's the nature of tea.”

Tea was not a central part of Fan's life while growing up in Houston. He primarily only drank it when out with his family for dim sum, a meal consisting of small, shared plates of foods like dumplings. His father immigrated from China before he was born, and while Fan grew up in touch with his heritage, the American lens of life influenced his connection with it. In high school, he first attempted to pour tea after watching the 2000 martial arts film “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” which had a scene featuring the pouring style. He went to a local Chinese grocery store and bought a low quality gaiwan, along with a box of jasmine tea, and attempted to pour without any training or explanations on the correct pouring method.

“I can do it now that I'm older, but then it was so hot and the gaiwan was shitty, so it was burning my lips, burning my fingers, and the tea sucked,” Fan said. “I was just like, ‘I don't know if I like this,’ so I just gave up on it then.”

It wasn't until Fan moved to Santa Cruz, California, for college and visited Chaikhana Tea Culture, a local tea house that has since closed, that he got his first taste of what it was like to be served properly in the Gong Fu Cha way. Entranced, he bought an authentic, high quality tea set and began serving, whether it be for his housemate to accompany their breakfast or with friends during late night studying sessions. It became a way for him to not only connect with his heritage, but an avenue for him to bridge the social gap with people outside the demands of everyday monotonous life.

“It just became my main social thing,” Fan said. “I was not old enough to buy alcohol or go to bars, so I was just doing tea stuff all the time. Then, by the time I turned 21, I just didn't really have that much need or space in my life for social drinking because I had a robust social life that's centered around tea.”

Fan's stance on sharing tea — and on spreading its welcoming message — only grew from there. He taught free classes in Santa Cruz in the early days of the Internet, where a person could sign up to teach or enroll in classes about any topic on freeschool.org, which was essentially a shared calendar page. After that, he travelled the country, stopping at the deserts of New Mexico, the forests of Vermont and the rural places in between, pouring tea for the strangers he met along the way.

“I spent a lot of time thinking that this is my weird, niche interest that I wouldn’t expect anyone else to get why this is fun or like this at all,” Fan said. “But I kept having these experiences where people were really moved by it, and so that definitely helped set me on this path.”

After moving to Austin in 2007, Fam worked a myriad of jobs, from manning a phone at a call center to cutting fish at Quality Seafood. He landed a job as the tea sommelier at Jade Leaves Tea House on Guadalupe Street, which allowed him to keep spreading the knowledge of Gong Fu Cha. Three years later, he moved to Chengdu, China, for marine research, which he received a degree in while attending school in Santa Cruz. It was there that he was introduced to farm direct tea, and tasted the potential tea holds when it’s not highly processed like the kinds sold in the American market.

When Fan moved back to Austin at the end of 2012, he brought back some of these high quality leaves with him. But of course, they wouldn’t last forever, especially as he continued pouring tea for friends. It was only a matter of time before more leaves were needed.

“I was tea-less, and I can’t have that,” Fan said. “But I was like, ‘Well, I’m not going to pay a bunch of money for overpriced, inferior American, imported tea. I will simply get on WeChat and message the (tea) farmers that I met while I was in China and get them to send me tea.’”

However, under [regulations instituted by the Federal Drug Administration](#), only registered businesses with specific licenses could import foreign foods at the quantities that Fan was wanting to buy tea in. He filed an application with the county clerk’s office to create the West China Tea Company within a week. Three months after he received his first shipment of tea, he was laid off from his remote job and turned to running West China Tea as a public business.

The company started small, with Fan serving tea off a suitcase in a room rented from Clementine and Co. Jewelry on Greenwood Avenue. A small 200 square foot room where Fan both stored the dry leaves and served tea, the venue was quickly outgrown as public interest proved the tea house’s services were wanted. They moved to a clubhouse at what is now Zucchini Kill Bakery next to Tweedy’s Bar, right off 38th and Guadalupe streets. The business then moved to a spot next to Interstate 35 because of similar space issues three years later, and relocated to their current location seven years after that because of the highway’s expansion.

The tea house serves teas out of three rooms at their new location, including the room Fan was pouring in. Customers flow in and out of each area throughout the night, some hesitating before taking a seat because of their inexperience and some greeting the other customers with hugs and hellos. Within minutes of sitting down, the room’s atmosphere dispels any patron’s discomfort.

“Where has this been all my life?” a newcomer said on a sigh, sipping a freshly brewed pu’er.

With a slight laugh, Fan refills their cup, along with the rest at the table. Regulars tap the table twice with their pointer and middle fingers — a way of conveying “thank you” without interrupting the flow of conversation — before requesting the next kind of tea. A regular starts strumming an instrument called a shamisen, a three-stringed Japanese instrument akin to a banjo, filling the gaps between conversation with gentle music. Some customers stay for only an hour, some until close, but Fan keeps track of how many pots each customer drinks to check them out at the end of their visit.

Affordability is another aspect the tea house operates around. Each pot, or rather each tea that is brewed, costs \$6. One pot produces enough tea for each drinker to have multiple cups, allowing customers to repeatedly taste and absorb the flavors. Fan also teaches both virtual and in-person classes teaching the pouring style for \$120 or less, depending on the class. The tea house also has a [YouTube channel](#) breaking down the different teas, along with the pouring style.

The tea house offers six types of teas — green, yellow, oolong, red, white and hei cha — for customers to sample and purchase. Each type is from the same tea plant, but the flavors and color are different based on the oxidation levels of the leaves. Cooking the leaves slows down the oxidation process, with the least oxidized teas coming from leaves that were prepared after being recently picked and vice versa with the more oxidized ones.

Green is the least oxidized tea, and red teas, or what most western countries like America consider black tea, are the most. Yellow teas are only slightly oxidized, and oolongs have the widest oxidation range. Some specific oolongs fall at only 20% oxidation and some register as high as 80%, depending on the batch. Though it does oxidize, white tea does so on a much slower timeframe than other teas, meaning it is for the most part unoxidized.

Hei cha, which translates to “black tea” in Chinese, are fermented teas that do not fit onto the oxidation spectrum because of their different production method. Pu’er is an offshoot that is commonly designated into its own branch of tea, though it technically fits under the hei cha umbrella. The most common kind in the west, shu pu’er, is a type of hei cha traditionally traded in areas of China. Sheng pu’er is tea that is processed like green tea and sold in that state, but will ultimately oxidize over time. However, it will never be at the same level of fermentation as shu pu’er.

Purple tea is not a type of tea like green or white, or a historically designated type of tea like hei cha, but is a tea recognized by its unusually colored tea leaves. The leaves are traditionally a natural shade of foliage, but these purple leaves are an oddity that can be used to make any type of tea on the oxidation spectrum. Unorthodox teas are ones made from the traditional tea plants,

but don't fit cleanly in one of the six types of teas. Fan keeps a variety of each type in stock at the tea house, both for purchase and for sampling, and answers questions about the teas, especially if they're new to the tea house.

“In a traditional Chinese tea service context, you are thrust into interaction with strangers, even at the very least the person serving you tea,” Fan said. “It’s a more intimate interaction than a cashier at a grocery store or a barista at a coffee shop.”

The tea house operates as a third space, or an accessible area outside of work and the home designated for gatherings, discussions and general socialization. These spaces are not only for providing a break from the long spans of time society spends online in this digital age, but critical to developing as humans, said Ben Bentzin, an associate professor of instruction in marketing at the University of Texas.

“We are fundamentally social creatures — you can’t replicate online the full richness of an in-person experience,” Bentzin said. “Your connection with someone online requires a lot more intentionality of like, ‘Oh, you and I are together.’ ... We didn’t just bump into each other at the tea house and yet, those types of random encounters are also important, both for the development of social skills and for the forming of stronger social networks.”



Ghost, a clay tea pet, sits covered in used tea leaves and water rinses. He’s one of many that sits on the tea bars in the business. Photo by Vivien Ayers.

At one of the other service bars in the tea house, Mandy Harmon pours a steeping of Gold Thread Honey Orchid, a type of oolong tea. A tea pet named Ghost, a husky her partner fashioned out of clay in remembrance of their dog who died, sits stoically next to her. Tea pets are tiny statues that sit in porcelain bowls on the serving bar for used leaves and water rinses of the gaiwans to be dumped into.

Harmon only works at the tea house part time when she’s not out in the field filming. After spending a decade in the corporate world as a marketer, she decided a career transition was the next step in her life. Film, which she had gone to school for years ago, was the logical choice. Harmon visited the tea house for the first time only a year ago, when her partner was deciding whether to attend the American Film Institute or UT.

“I’d never experienced that level of quality from farm-direct tea leaves before,” Harmon said. “I really enjoyed the tea bar style that was I could socialize as much or as little as I wanted to while it wasn’t a bar environment.”

Harmon visited the tea house for over a year before applying to work there a few months ago to learn more about tea and the Gong Fu Cha style. Working at a place that aligned closely with her values, as well as prioritized the community, was critical to her. The tea house was a combination of both, she said, especially with the community-oriented events the company holds each week for customers to attend.

“I really appreciate curated spaces just where people can show up as they are — that is something we all want more of,” Harmon said. “There’s lots of hippy-dippy spots that can get a little cult-y sometimes, and the tea house is not like that. It’s very casual. Everyone who gets here is from very different walks of life.”

Mondays are Womens/Trans/Femmes nights, or WTF, where no cis-gendered men are allowed in the building. Thursday evenings every other week are limited to men only for their SpaceHolders meeting, creating an environment where they can partake in the service without fear of judgement about drinking a beverage commonly viewed as feminine.

Hamon regularly serves during WTF events, where she asks every customer their name and pronouns before introducing herself. She joins conversations, touching on everything from fantasy books to the state of the public education system, while constantly keeping an eye on the levels of tea in everyone’s cups to ensure no cup runs dry for very long. It’s a trait that all the servers who work at the tea house share.

Every two weeks on Friday, the tea house hosts CommuniTEA, which is a free, donation-based event starting at 8 p.m.. Once donations reach a certain predetermined threshold, the tea house stays open an additional hour. The cycle continues until either the threshold is not reached or the workers tap out, which has happened at quite a few of the last nights, Fan said. It’s not uncommon for the tea house to close at 1 or 2 a.m. during these events, hours after the normal 10 p.m. close time.

“(The tea house) fills a lot of the holes that a bar would fill, without a lot of the problems of a bar,” said Brian Lester, a regular at the tea house who has visited about five times a week for the past three years. “You get a better social atmosphere, you get better conversations, you get a different breed of person here and there’s no substance or any addiction.”

Lester works as the director of sales for a large solar construction company in a remote office. During the day, when he has time between meetings, the tea house is his go-to spot. Even if he

has to step out during tea service for a call, his black and gold tea cup is full and steaming when he returns.

“People are just here because they're drinking tea — you get all kinds of different people coming in here,” Fan said. “One of the really big misconceptions is that tea is this closed, elitist kind of snobby thing and that if you don't conform to the standards of the community, then you don't fit in.”

Political polarization along ideological lines are at an all-time high for the past few decades, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). A lack of empathy for different perspectives is more prominent as well, worsening the divide. The tea house stands as a spot for people of any perspective to have open conversations without fear of judgement, Fan said.

"What we do here that's really special is that we have cohesion without conformity, and we have groups of people who have literally nothing to do with each other, who might literally think of each other as being natural enemies,” Fan said. “I know for a fact that there are people who have come into this tea house who were transphobes and were served tea by a transgender person in the tea house, and left the tea house thinking about trans people differently, more positively as people because when someone is an abstraction in your mind and you don't know them, then you can project all kinds of negative stuff onto them.”

Fan said he knows changing a person’s perspective is a transformation that is neither fast nor one that can be forced. But if the tea house can act as a jumping point for people to open their minds, then it’s worth it.

“They are welcome here and I will serve them tea, and I will be happy to serve them tea,” Fan said. “I'm glad that they're present here, because I think that the way that you heal bigotry is not by trying to convince people that they're wrong. ... The way you heal bigotry is by putting them into contact with the people that they have discriminatory views of so that they can gradually, organically and at their own pace, release those discriminatory stereotypes.”

However, running the tea house during this time of political strife is not easy. The U.S. government has [levied tariffs against China](#) repeatedly over the past three administrative terms. In 2018, the first Trump administration’s tariffs on steel and aluminum, including from China, to 25% and 10% respectively. In April 2025, a retaliatory showoff between the second Trump administration and China raised those tariffs to 125% before an agreement a month later reduced it to 10% for 90 days. After an extension, the tariff rate returned to 125% on Nov. 10, impacting all foreign imports, including tea.

“The question (is if a company’s) going to pass the prices onto consumers or if (they’re) going to absorb some of it as a loss or reduction in profits,” UT economics professor Kishore Gawande said. “That’s the big question facing imports.”

In response to the tariffs, the tea house did not raise prices for customers, but instead launched the “CommuniTEA Chest” in mid-October. The fundraiser allowed customers to donate to stock up the tea house on tea and teaware before the tariffs returned and receive a 20% discount that could be redeemed in store or online.

By the end of the month, the company had raised just shy of \$20,000 — all of which will go towards ordering more tea to keep the business operating and the open conversations flowing.

“I think of each one of those tea houses as a little water filter. You’ve got a big old dirty, polluted pond and all you can do is filter it a little bit at a time — nothing that you can do is going to magically make the whole pond clean,” Fan said. “But over time and with enough spread, then you can eventually clean the water — that’s what we’re doing. Once people can be convinced to care about each other or persuaded to care about each other, then we can fix all the other stuff. But until that’s achieved, nothing good is going to happen.”

As the hours pass, and the only illumination outside comes from the tea house’s wide windows, Fan continues steeping teas. The flood of customers eventually slows to a trickle, with the last few staying for final sips before heading home for the evening. Fan met each customer upon entry with an energetic “Ni-howdy” and bids them farewell with promises to see them next time. The door closes behind the last guest as they leave, bringing in a gust of cold night air.

With a dumping of the leaf-strewn tea pets into the trashcan, a rinse of the gaiwans and a reorganization of the raw tea leaves on their wooden shelf, Fan meticulously resets the tea bar. There’s more work to be done, from ordering tea to packaging freshly arrived leaves into smaller bags for purchase.

But that’s for tomorrow.