

# CITY ON THE EDGE

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A new breed of HONG KONG teahouses, cocktail bars and pubs is ushering in a vibrant drinks scene.



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aught up in a rush to the future, Hong Kong is a city that rarely makes room for the past, behind the bar or anywhere else. Instead, Hong Kongers embrace the new, the trendy, the fun. This is not surprising, really, once you consider that Hong Kong doesn't have much of a history of its own. This busy city of seven million people, which now glitters with the glass and steel towers that crowd the banks of Victoria Harbour, was ignored for centuries as a barren rock of an island. It wasn't until after World War II that the former British colony developed into a world-class city, a commercial and financial center where new developments spring up so fast there is no time to be sentimental about the past.



Tea time at Lock Cha Tea House.

Its denizens, a dynamic mix of local Chinese and adventurous expats hard up for imports from the West, missed out on the best of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century cocktail culture and never established any kind of local distilling or brewing traditions. In the past few years, however, Hong Kong's drinks culture has finally begun to hit its stride. As the quality of the available tea, spirits and beer has improved, the city's unique mix of Eastern and Western cultures is starting to bear fruit for local drinkers, producing a mix of flavors and an aesthetic that is unique to this vibrant, culturally mixed city.

## A CITY BUILT ON TEA

If anything can be said to have a history in Hong Kong, it's tea. For centuries, teahouses were the city's social, cultural and commercial centers. When the British arrived in the 1800s, it was tea that brought them, and it was tea that fueled the colony that they established. In fact, it would not be much of a stretch to say that Hong Kong's entire modern era was built on tea and on the fusion of cultures that it gave

birth to. Today tea is still the beverage of choice. "We drink tea all day," says Wing-chi Ip, founding chairman of the Hong Kong Tea Association. "We have morning tea, afternoon tea and then late tea. Even in the evening time we still have tea."

Traditionally this was dark *bo lei*, or pu-erh tea, as well as some delicate oolongs and green teas. But sometime after the British introduced the tradition of drinking black tea with milk and sugar, Hong Kongers began to drink what is arguably the city's signature beverage, Hong Kong-style milk tea.

Though clearly an adaptation of British tea traditions, the origins of this blend of strong black tea with sugar and creamy evaporated milk are murky—some locals tell how a British official's wife started the trend by serving afternoon tea to construction workers, while others insist that the style came out of India's chai-making tradition. But by the 1950s, it had become a popular drink, served at *cha chan tans*, small tea stands that proliferated around the city. Many of these stands are still in business today, using their original recipes. "We use the old method to do our tea," says Johnson So, the owner of Tak Yu, which his father opened in 1954.





This method, used by most establishments, involves brewing extremely strong black tea (using a high tea-to-water ratio) with leaves from India, mixing the tea with condensed milk, and then straining it repeatedly, as many as six or eight times, through long, thin cloth bags to give the mixture a silky texture. It can be served hot or iced, with sugar or without. It is drunk not only for breakfast and alongside lunch, but also in the afternoon, when, in a local adaptation of the British tradition of afternoon tea, workers take a break daily for a cup of the brew.

Milk tea is also the base for another Hong Kong classic, *yuan yang*, a mixture of milk tea and coffee. One of the best versions is made at Lan Fong Yuen, an immensely popular tea stand and lunch shop on a narrow, crowded street in the Central neighborhood. There, the sweetness of the milk tea gives the yuan yang a flavor reminiscent of coffee ice cream, and locals line up all day to grab a cup.

The original surge in milk tea's popularity in the '50s and '60s coincided with an erosion in the quality of the



Hong Kong-style milk tea at Tak Yu.

green teas and pu-erhs available in Hong Kong, when tea exports from China stopped due to the country's cultural and political unrest. It wasn't until after Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping loosened travel restrictions to the Chinese countryside in the 1980s that Hong Kong developed a market for high-quality, single-estate teas. Beginning in the late '80s, a handful of tea lovers began traveling to China's most famous tea regions, including Mr. Ip, who founded the tea company Lock Cha in 1991 and began selling tea acquired directly from farmers. "I started to sell some tea in single-day harvests, because I didn't want to just blend the tea into grade one, grade two and grade three," he says. "And this concept was very welcomed by some people, and it became a trend."

In 2003 he opened the Lock Cha Tea House, a sunny escape in Hong Kong Park offering more than 100 teas, mostly Chinese, from a light green tea from Anhui with a floral aroma and a sweet, hay-like flavor to a woody, honey-noted oolong from the mountains of Taiwan.

The city's large western expat community has also played a role in reviving interest in high-quality teas. "In Hong Kong, people always think that things from abroad are much better than local things," says Vivian Mak, owner of the tea company MingCha, which began selling single-origin teas, most of them from China, in 1999. Though the company was based in Hong Kong, Mak aimed at foreign markets when she began promoting her teas, developing a reputation in Japan, Paris and London. That reputation followed her back to Hong Kong, where she now runs the business out of a modern, loft-like shop hidden in an industrial building in the Taikoo neighborhood. While many of her customers are still westerners, her local customer base continues to grow, and in the past few years, Mak has even started to see customers from mainland China who favor Hong Kong tea companies for their trustworthiness, particularly after China's recent food contamination scandals, she says.

## EAST MEETS WEST

While the expatriate community has had only a small hand in the development of Hong Kong's tea market, it has been the driving force behind the city's cocktail revolution. Until recently, Hong Kong was a wasteland for cocktail lovers. "Ten years ago in Hong Kong, cocktails were very much like a fruit punch with some booze in it," says Peter Kendall, formerly a bartender at Milk & Honey in London and now one of the handful of bartenders bringing classic and well-crafted mixed drinks to Hong Kong. Fittingly for the city known as Asia's business and travel hub, the cocktail revolution began in some of the city's best hotels. Its genesis can be traced back to the Mandarin Oriental in 2006, when the hotel hired bartenders and managers formerly of the Match Bar Group in London (proprietors of Milk & Honey) to renovate the hotel's cocktail menus and to train their staffs.

These cocktails quickly caught on with the city's sophisticated drinkers, and soon other bar owners were hiring talent from overseas to teach their staffs. "Hong Kong's very much a village," says Sam Jevons, who along with Kendall and Angus Winchester, founder of the cocktail consulting firm Alconomics, oversaw the Mandarin Oriental's program. "If one thing happens in this side of the village, it will be replicated to some degree on that side of the village. So it's very easy to affect a change."

Some bars integrated quality cocktails into Hong Kong's club scene, blending touches of speakeasy-style décor with hip hop and a boisterous see-and-be-seen atmosphere. The restaurant Lily & Bloom, located in the middle of Lan Kwai Fong, excels at this, serving a list of classics like the Clover Club and the Navy Grog. The bar embraces the neighborhood's party atmosphere, welcoming the young and the trendy who, though they might not know about the history behind the cocktails, appreciate their quality.

Meanwhile, hotel bars continue to act as a force for innovation and quality, and the best have begun to develop a style that is based in classic British and American traditions while using local ingredients and embracing the city's taste for lighter, fruitier



## PEASANT'S MARGARITA

GRAPEFRUIT UPDATES THE CLASSIC MARGARITA, AND HONEY AND AGAVE SWEETEN THE DEAL.

1½ oz. blanco tequila  
½ oz. fresh lime juice  
½ oz. fresh grapefruit juice  
¼ oz. honey syrup (3:1 honey to water)  
¼ oz. undiluted agave nectar  
Ice cubes  
Tools: shaker, strainer  
Glass: cocktail  
Garnish: grapefruit twist

Combine all ingredients in a shaker. Shake, strain into a glass and garnish.

SAM JEVEONS, CAFÉ GRAY DELUXE





## GINGER LILY

NEEDING TO REVIVE SLUMBERING TASTE BUDS? THIS FORMULA WILL DO THE TRICK.

1¾ oz. Irish whiskey  
¾ oz. fresh lemon juice  
⅓ oz. ginger syrup  
½ oz. simple syrup (1:1)  
3 chunks fresh pineapple  
4–8 mint leaves  
Ginger beer  
Ice cubes

Tools: muddler, shaker, strainer  
Glass: highball

Garnish: lemon wedge and mint sprig

In a shaker, combine all ingredients except the ginger beer, and muddle the pineapple and mint. Shake and strain into an ice-filled glass, then top with the ginger beer and garnish.

VICTOR HUI, SUGAR

drinks. After his stint at the Mandarin Oriental and a few years consulting in other parts of Asia, Jevons signed on as a director at the Upper House hotel, designing the cocktail menu for Café Gray Deluxe, which boasts a swanky bar with stunning views that is patronized by the city's well-heeled businessmen and visitors. He uses local ingredients like Shanghai White (a new vodka made in Chengdu, China), Chinese ginger and even salty-sour preserved orange peels, and his cocktails exemplify Hong Kong's emerging style. Many of his drinks rely heavily on fresh fruit and juices without masking the spirits, like the Peasant's Margarita, a mix of tequila, lime juice, grapefruit juice, honey and agave syrup.

Kendall is also now at the helm of a hotel bar, Sugar, located on the top floor of East hotel in the Taikoo neighborhood, where a young, party-friendly atmosphere and large deck draw a local crowd. He too has built a menu that highlights fresh fruit with drinks like the Honey-Melon Margarita, made with fresh honeydew. "You're taking these European understandings of classic drinks, of structuring a cocktail, and making it Asian through fruitiness," says Kendall. He also uses fresh juices to make a number of creative mocktails, like a combination of fresh strawberry and orange juices and ginger beer, to cater to the many customers who don't drink or who want an alcohol-free option to turn to after their first cocktail.

For those who embrace stronger, more western-style cocktails, the newest trend in the Hong Kong drinking scene is the arrival of a handful of speakeasy-style bars. The most exclusive, 001, maintains a level of secrecy abandoned even in the modern speakeasy-style bars of New York. Those who manage to make it past its unmarked door, however, are rewarded with an elegant, dark room decorated with bevel-edged mirrors, marble tables and cerulean blue upholstered banquettes, not to mention a remarkably long list of cocktails inspired by classics—like the Pear Sidecar made with pear eau de vie and the Midnight Manhattan made with cherry- and vanilla-infused bourbon—as well as fruity originals, like the Strawberry Blond, a mix of strawberry-infused vodka, ginger liqueur, strawberry purée, lemon juice and basil syrup.

"People were waiting for something like this," says Maxence Traverse, the bar manager at another hidden spot, Le Boudoir. Since he opened his small bar, decorated to evoke 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, Traverse, a French native who trained in England, has been serving classic drinks with a twist, like a saffron-flavored Negroni and a lemongrass Mojito, to locals who return regularly to drink their way through his menu.

In addition to these classically inspired spots, a handful of bars offer cocktails made with techniques appropriated from molecular gastronomy. The city's poster boy for this movement is Antonio Lai, a Hong Kong local who uses molecular techniques to develop showy cocktails for bars like Hush, a leather-paneled spot in the city's party district; Angel's Share, a cozy whisky bar with a small cocktail menu; and his own bar, Quinary, which opened in April. Lai uses lecithin to create frothy foams and calcium chloride to make "caviar" from juices and teas. Some of his creations seem to be mostly about the showiness of the process, but others, like his Oolong Tea Gimlet, in which he uses carbon dioxide to give a blend of gin, grapefruit bitters and sweetened oolong tea a Champagne-like quality, are more toned-down in their delivery.



Bartender Peter Kendall behind the bar at Sugar.





# OO LONG TEA COLLINS

A NATIVE CHINESE TEA  
IS THE KICKER IN THIS ZESTY GIN COLLINS.

- 2 oz. gin
- 1 oz. oolong tea cordial (see below)
- 3 drops grapefruit bitters
- 6 oz. Perrier or another highly carbonated sparkling water
- Ice cubes
- Tools: shaker, strainer

Combine gin, oolong tea cordial and bitters in a shaker, then shake and strain into a Collins glass over fresh ice cubes. Top with sparkling water, then garnish.

**FOR THE OOLONG TEA CORDIAL:** Place 4 teaspoons of oolong tea leaves into 1½ cups of hot water at 158 degrees F and soak for 10 minutes. Strain the tea and discard the leaves. Let the tea cool to room temperature. Separately, combine ¼ oz. of citric acid, ½ tsp. of cream of tartar, 10 oz. of hot water and 1¼ cups of sugar, mixing until the sugar is fully dissolved. Let the mixture cool to room temperature, then combine with the tea. Chill the cordial in the refrigerator until ready to use. Use within seven days.

ANTONIO LAI, QUINARY

# SOMETHING BREWING

Strangely for a largely British city, Hong Kong was also long bereft of good beer options. Due to a punishing import duty on alcohol that was only lifted in 2008, most bars served a paltry list consisting of mainly European macrobrews, despite the fact that Hong Kongers so love beer that they drink just under six gallons per capita each year. But following the abolition of the tariff, a wide variety of beers has begun to appear in a few dedicated pubs. “More and more people are aware of and are demanding better quality and more varieties,” says Toby Cooper, director of the Globe, one of the most popular beer spots in town.

Cooper, who came to Hong Kong 15 years ago and began running the Globe in 2003, maintains a list of beers from around the world with an emphasis on British and Belgian offerings, including many from small breweries, like Thornbridge Brewery’s Jaipur IPA and Timothy Taylor’s Landlord Pale Ale. Due to the bar’s limited storage space, Cooper primarily buys small amounts of these beers, but as his menu constantly changes, he’s able to offer an astounding number of beers throughout the year. On special occasions he’ll even air-freight in hard-to-find bottles to give his regulars a chance to try beers that would otherwise never make it to Hong Kong.

Some other pubs have begun to import their own beers, including the restaurant group El Grande Concepts, owners of East End Brewery, Inn Side Out, Cochrane’s and other Hong Kong spots, which imports beer like Sierra Nevada and other American craft beers that they can’t get through local distributors.

There are even the first stirrings of a local craft-brewing scene. East End Brewery works with the small Hong Kong Brewing Company to create two house beers, a Vienna Lager and a Pale Ale, and in 2009, Pierre Cadoret, a pilot for Cathay Pacific, opened Typhoon Brewery on Lantau Island, near Hong Kong International Airport. “I used to come to Hong Kong every month, and coming from England, where there’s a real beer culture, I never found anything satisfactory to drink,” he says.

Cadoret began with his signature T8, an English bitter, and then developed two more beers, a blond ale called Eastern Lightning, and a dark ale, Darkside. Local drinkers have embraced all, but so far, due to the constraints of his schedule as a pilot and the fact that the outlets he sells to need to invest in mechanically cooled storage containers to combat Hong Kong’s heat, Cadoret has only been able to offer the beers at the Globe and at a Turkish restaurant on neighboring Lantau Island. But he’s confident that once he overcomes these hurdles there will be a large domestic market for his products. He also believes the demand for quality beers will increase in the local Chinese community. “I think the hook will be the expat community, but that said, the Chinese have a strong taste for beer. They just don’t know what’s out there yet,” he explains. “People appreciate good products. But, of course, you can’t appreciate anything of quality until it’s actually put in front of you. And I think that is what hasn’t happened yet in Hong Kong with beer.” ■



Clockwise from top left: Toby Cooper at the Globe; the taplist at the Globe; cocktails at Café Grey Deluxe.

