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NEIGHBORHOOD
WATCH

Teeming With Tea

San Francisco's Chinatown—America's oldest—is a hotbed for the herbal beverage
By Kimberley Lovato Photos by Cayce Clifford



ILLUSTRATION BY AMELIA FLOWER / FOLIO ART

RED LANTERNS SWAY OVER GRANT Avenue while along Stockton Street, shoppers haggle in Chinese over bins of obscure vegetables. “Chinatown is a little like a movie set,” says Alice Luong of the 24-square-block San Francisco neighborhood wedged between North Beach and the Financial District. Her upscale tea shop, Red Blossom Tea Company, is in the heart of it all, amidst dim sum restaurants, tchotchke emporiums, and a string of other places to sip China’s most ubiquitous beverage. “We drink tea at every occasion. It’s a staple in our culture, with a history going back thousands of years,” Luong explains, pouring hot water over delicate green tea leaves. Her

father, who hails from China’s Guangdong province, opened his herb and tea apothecary 35 years ago to serve the Chinese community, which first settled the neighborhood in 1848. It’s now the country’s oldest Chinatown, with traditions vibrantly on display, especially during the animated two-week Lunar New Year festival that kicks off January 25. Luong took the reins from her parents in 2002, and though Red Blossom provides tea to restaurants all over San Francisco, nostalgia keeps Luong connected to Chinatown. “Now the children of people I grew up with are taking over their family businesses, just like I did.”





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1. Steap Tea Bar

With blaring hip hop tunes, free Wi-Fi and a wall-mounted photo booth, this is Chinatown's hippest spot for matcha lattes, dirty chais and boba tea. Count on fresh ingredients, such as tapioca balls cooked every two hours, and unusual tea toppings, such as activated charcoal, hemp drops and chia seeds.

steapteabar.com

2. Vital Tea Leaf

A popular tour group stop for good reason, Vital boasts over 100 varieties of loose leaf tea inside its dozens of tins and jars. There's also a bar where co-owner Herman Duong leads free 30-minute tastings of three different teas, dropping knowledge of tasting notes and steeping techniques.

vitaltealeaf.net

3. TenRen's Tea

Originally founded in Taiwan in 1953, TenRen's Tea now counts more than 100 retail stores worldwide, including Chinatown's one-stop shop where you can taste, pick up

sachets of tea and tea-themed gifts such as decorative canisters and service sets, or sip boba tea from the bar in the back.

tenren.com

4. China Live

This multi-level Chinese food market includes the ground floor Oolong Café that serves an acclaimed Dong Ding Oolong from Taiwan and Dragonwell Lung Ching, a well-known green tea from China. Upstairs, the Cold Drinks Bar has a Shanghai Mai Tai, infusing black tea with rum, whiskey, orgeat and lime.

chinalivesf.com

5. Red Blossom Tea Company

Some of San Francisco's Michelin-starred restaurants seek out China's finest tea from this gallery-like shop that also sells artisan cups and *gaiwans*, the small lidded bowls in which tea is brewed. Book a discovery tasting flight (\$35) of four varietals prepared by Luong or her knowledgeable staff.

redblossomtea.com