

TRAVEL

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A chip Off the Old block

Learn about Taiwanese tea history at Youji Mingcha, a family-run tea shop that has been operating in Taipei's Dadaocheng District since the early 1900s

BY DAVID CHEN
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A group of nanguan enthusiasts performs every Saturday at Youji Mingcha.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES



Tea aficionados and traditional culture enthusiasts will feel right at home at Youji Mingcha (有記名茶), a tea shop in Taipei's Dadaocheng (大稻埕) District.

Customers sit in the warmly-lit parlor of this 70-year-old brick building near Chongqing North Road (重慶北路), sampling the shop's oolong, black and green teas, while employees play the attentive host, pouring tea and discussing the characteristics of each brew.

If the huge selection feels overwhelming, head upstairs and sip complimentary tea while listening to the quaint sounds of *nanguan* (南管), traditional chamber music from China's Fujian Province, performed by a group of middle-aged and elderly enthusiasts who gather here every Saturday afternoon.

Youji Mingcha is a family business that dates back to 1890. The operation has come a long way from its early days as an export distributor. In addition to selling and processing high-end, locally grown teas, the shop serves as a museum and educational resource, and offers tours of its small factory room in the back, where the teas are cured in traditional charcoal ovens.

But people don't come just to learn about tea, says 32-year-old Charmaine Wang (王聖雯), whose forebears founded Youji Mingcha. "Some people also want to learn about the history of Dadaocheng."

A CITY BUILT ON TEA

That history is intimately tied to the nation's favorite beverage. Dadaocheng became the center of Taiwan's tea trade in the late 1800s thanks in part to "Formosa Tea," which was first exported to the West by British merchant John Dodd.

Demand boomed for this strain of oolong, which was mostly grown in Northern Taiwan. This prompted droves of merchants from Europe, the US and China to set up trading and distribution offices at Dadaocheng.

At the peak of the trade, there were several hundred tea-processing factories in the area, which contributed to Dadaocheng's growth as Taiwan's major trading port, according to Wang Lien-yuan (王連源), Charmaine's father and Youji Mingcha's current owner.

"You could say that the tea leaf helped spread urban development from the south to the north," he said, referring to Tainan's former

role as Taiwan's capital. "Because of tea, Taipei transformed and flourished [as a city]."

FROM EXPORT BUSINESS TO MUSEUM

Wang's family moved its business from Xiamen to Taiwan in 1907 to capitalize on the demand for Formosa Tea, and exported mainly to Southeast Asia. Youji Mingcha is one of the few tea distributors left from Dadaocheng's glory days.

It has survived by changing with the times. The tea export business had declined by the 1970s as Taiwan's rapid industrialization siphoned off workers from the agricultural sector and the nation lost its competitive edge to other tea producers, such as India and Sri Lanka.

But at the same time, economic conditions improved and local demand for tea grew. Merchants then started to market tea in Taiwan for the first time, said Wang, and this marked a new beginning for Youji Mingcha.

"We began to do domestic sales in 1975," he said. "By the 1990s, people started to have higher expectations of their standard of living, and so then we started to change."

Wang renovated his shop with the "hope of encouraging Taiwanese tea culture" to blossom. He made the lobby more presentable, adding modern furnishings, but preserved the building's original architectural features such as the traditional front doors and timber ceiling beams. He also opened the processing room so visitors could see how the teas are processed.

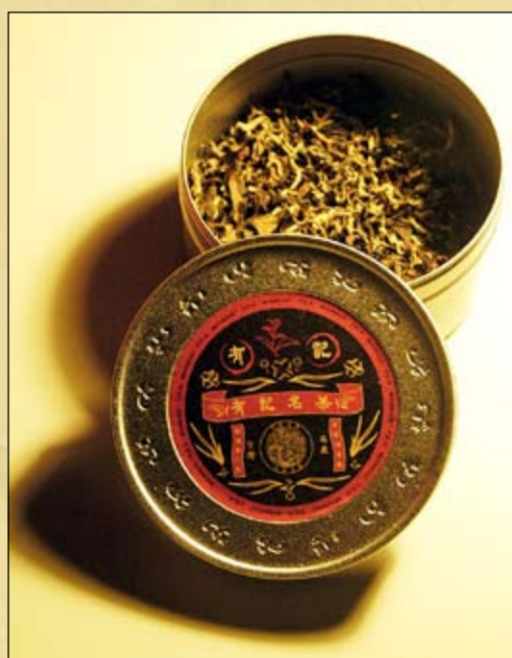
SWEET AROMA

At first glance, the factory area seems unremarkable — it's dimly lit, drab and full of aging equipment gathering dust — but what struck me upon entering was the sweet and fragrant aroma of tea that lingered from the curing room. You can see the caffeine on the walls, which forms as a brown residue from the curing process.

The shop still relies on the same curing method from the early days of the business. Tea leaves are placed in large bamboo baskets and roasted over pits filled with rice husk charcoal.

The roasting process, which serves to further refine the flavors of each tea, is a delicate operation that requires careful control of the temperature by adjusting the amount of charcoal. During the day, you can watch two middle-aged "masters" employed by Youji Mingcha at work.

Youji Mingcha says its curing process contributes to the unique character of its teas,



Oriental Beauty Tea is one of the high-grade oolong teas available at Youji Mingcha.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES



Tea leaves are roasted in bamboo baskets over charcoal fires in Youji Mingcha's curing room.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

some of which fetch high prices: the top grade of the shop's signature Qizhong Oolong (奇種烏龍) costs up to NT\$2,400 per 600g.

The wide selection includes various grades of Wenshan Baozhong (文山包種), Oriental Beauty (東方美人, also known as "champagne oolong") and High Mountain Oolong (高山烏龍), which Charmaine Wang poured for me on a recent visit.

THE TASTE TEST

Since I'm just a casual tea drinker, she started off by asking whether I preferred heavy or light flavors. She said "80 percent" of customers that come to Youji Mingcha like High Mountain, which is grown at high altitudes, because "it is neither light nor heavy" and has its "own unique taste." I found the tea to have a slightly fruity flavor, similar to the aroma in the curing room.

Though brewing tea is considered by some to be an art form, Wang says there are no rules, only personal preference. "Everybody has different tastes," she said. "So we have one lesson that says 'there's no need to study how to make tea' because everyone has their own style of making it."

This is a refreshing attitude from a family of connoisseurs and perhaps a good strategy for attracting new customers. Meanwhile, I've resolved to return to Youji Mingcha on a Saturday afternoon and listen to a *nanguan* performance, which the elder Wang says recalls the earlier days of Dadaocheng when Fujian immigrant tea merchants spent their evenings at home playing flutes and stringed instruments.

Wang is heartened by the fact that his children have shown an interest in the business and its history. Charmaine and her 25-year-old brother, Jason Wang (王聖鈞), run Youji Mingcha's day-to-day operations.

"When you bring culture into a traditional industry, younger people will like it," he said. "We're hoping more young people will accept this line of business."

IF YOU GO

Youji Mingcha (有記名茶)

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>> On the Net: www.wangtea.com.tw

>> Details: A group of *nanguan* musicians performs on the shop's second floor on Saturdays from 2pm to 5pm. Entrance is free and tea is complimentary. It's best to call ahead before attending as spaces are limited.