

# FOOD & WINE

The role of tea as a key ingredient in gastronomy was the impetus for the visit to Hong Kong last week by 83-year-old Merrill Fernando, the founder of Sri Lankan tea company Dilmah, which is now one of the largest tea companies in the world. He was here with his younger son Dilhan – the company is named for his two sons Malik and Dilhan.

The simple infusion is part of the fabric of Asian life. Globally, it is the second most consumed beverage after water, and is a rapidly growing sector of the drinks market, driven by its associated health benefits. It is the drink of choice for many to accompany breakfast, dim sum and pastries, yet how many of us stop and think about the pairing potential of tea?

“On a functional level tea neutralises flavours, cleanses the palate and aids digestion, on a wellness level there are numerous health benefits, and on a sensorial level it can be used to highlight flavours; ultimately tea is a beautiful marriage with food,” says Dilhan Fernando.

When pairing food and tea there are three significant factors to consider – components (sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami), texture (stringency/tannins) and flavour (aroma and taste), which can be complementary or contrasting. Take the traditional pairing of the classic beef or pork sausage fry-up with an English Breakfast blend. Edwin Soon, sensory evaluation consultant and author, explains: “The tannins in the tea cut through the fat, the cleansing flavour of the tea contrasts with the meaty flavour of the sausage and, on the component side, the lightly bitter aromatic tea contrasts with the saltiness of the meat.” Other breakfast pairings include Indian masala chai with croissants and pain au chocolat; Moroccan mint green tea or mint with papaya and strawberries, oolong with scrambled eggs, and a souchong with smoked salmon. Spicy



Dilmah's Real High Tea Challenge 2014 in Hong Kong challenged chefs to pair fine food with their tea.

## CUPS AND SAUCES

A leading tea producer is on a mission to show that the simple beverage can elevate fine cuisine, writes Vicki Williams

breakfast fans could try English Breakfast or Earl Grey.

Dim sum offers lots of potential for experimenting, too, says Soon. “For me, the best match with *siu mai* and *har gau* is a mid-grown or low-grown tea such as the meda watte or yata watte, alternatively Ceylon supreme (all black tea). The four different altitude regions where tea is grown in Sri Lanka display different terroir and seasons, resulting in unique tea, such as the stronger low-grown, or the medium-bodied mid-grown.

“You need teas that are intense and with sufficient

“Ultimately, tea is a beautiful marriage with food

DILHAN FERNANDO OF DILMAH

polyphenols or tannins to stand up to the taste of the dishes. Matches such as har gau and low-grown tea occur because the tea is not too aromatic, the texture complements the steamed exterior, and it contrasts and enhances the flavour of the fillings.” These teas also go well with dim sum that has a fried tofu exterior.

Oyata (a Ceylon oolong) is a good choice for a congee pairing says Soon. “This tea has the perfume of an oolong, yet incorporates lower-grown tea flavours, so it pairs well with delicate dishes at the Chinese banquet table, and comfort foods such as congee, even with ginger and century egg. The smooth polyphenols in the tea cut through the starchy texture of the congee and the creamy yolk.” Another option is masala chai, which Soon says is an unexpected match that will appeal to connoisseurs of tea and food looking for more unusual combinations.

Another overlooked pairing opportunity is afternoon and high tea. Few chefs consider if the tea actually complements the food being served – and treat it as just a beverage to wash down food, rather than as something that could elevate it. This is why Dilmah introduced its Real High Tea Challenge, which aims to highlight the role of tea in fine food, by considering both the tea pairing and the dishes served.

Dilmah's use of the term high tea may not sit well with traditionalists who see it as a substantial late afternoon or early evening meal, distinguished from the lighter, more elegant afternoon tea served on a tiered platter. The company says this is an attempt to elevate afternoon tea through the use of tea pairing, and of hand-picked, single origin teas.

At home, tea tasting begins by brewing the tea correctly. This is vital and one thing that many of us get wrong. It includes the correct water temperature (85-100 degrees Celsius depending on

tea type), ratio of tea to water (one heaped teaspoon/one teabag for 220ml water), and brewing time (two-five minutes depending on tea/tisane variety).

To taste like a pro, quickly and sharply slurp a small amount of tea from a spoon, then slurp sharply once more. When the tea is tasted in this way it aerates the olfactory senses allowing for taste and smell stimulation simultaneously. Things to note are the dominant elements (aroma, flavour, texture,) and its intensity and finish when swallowed. [life@scmp.com](mailto:life@scmp.com)



Merrill Fernando, founder of tea company Dilmah.

### COMPETITION

## Chefs' hats off to young talent



Forty-eight chefs took part in the challenge. Photo: Thomas Yau

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Already a hot destination for foodies, Taiwan further bolstered its culinary reputation recently when Chuang Yu-Hsien, the executive chef at Master Ming's Danzai Noodles in Taipei, took home the top prize at a regional cook-off.

The cooking competition, sponsored by condiment giant Lee Kum Kee in partnership with the World Association of Chinese Cuisine, lured 48 young chefs to Hong Kong for a head-to-head, two-day Chinese cooking challenge.

The challengers – from Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan – were told they must cook in the Chinese style and were limited to preparing either prawn or steak dishes and using only the company's condiments.

With these restrictions, competition organisers hoped to steer chefs away from expressly regional cooking styles and level the playing field. Still, local touches were apparent on the plate, from the clean, unadorned presentations from Japan to the ever-present chillies and sub-continental flavours of the Malay Peninsula.

Competitors were judged by a panel of Chinese master chefs from across the region. “In the course of the competition we've seen a lot of 'new' sauces,” says Singaporean judge chef Pung Lu Tin.

By the second day of the competition, the enormous kitchen classroom at the Vocational Training Council in Pok Fu Lam was thick with steam and fatigue was starting to show amid the clang of pots and pans. Chefs in their freshly pressed whites dripped sweat as they fussed over the final touches to their dishes or leaned against the walls awaiting judgment.

With only 90 minutes to complete their dishes, time management was the biggest challenge for many competitors.

Hong Kong based chef Lor Sze-ho – who presented a deep-fried prawn dish with a sauce made from butter, condensed milk and black pepper – said although he wasn't nervous, and all went smoothly in the kitchen, he still struggled to stay on schedule.

The judges were also starting to show the strain – understandable given they'd tried nearly 50 dishes in just two days. They say they were able to avoid palate fatigue by drinking Chinese tea between tastings, but Hong Kong-based judge chef Lau Ping-lui's comment was typical: “I think that for the next month no more beef or prawns for me.”

The judges agree that the dishes were stronger on the second day. “[On the first day] some of the young chefs were very nervous, so some of the dishes were not fully cooked and some of the presentations were not properly balanced,” says Pung. Those problems were mostly absent on the second day. In fact, the chefs were so good that judges found themselves in a quandary. “Most of the young chefs are equally talented,” Pung says.

“The exchange with contestants reminds me that I want to strive for better still

CHUANG YU-HSIEN

At the City Hall awards ceremony 10 gold, 15 silver and 22 bronze medals were presented before the coveted grand prize, the Gold with Distinction Award, was awarded to Chuang.

The winning dishes – sautéed shredded beef with oyster sauce in winter melon cup and his deep-fried chilli garlic prawns seasoned with premium oyster sauce – were both traditional Taiwanese banquet style dishes he learned to cook from his parents.

None of the competitors left empty-handed. Organisers say the cook-off is less about stoking the chefs' competitive spirit and more about giving them a chance to learn from each other and gain experience in high-pressure environments.

Chuang agrees the real value of the challenge was in the opportunity to learn. “It certainly is exhilarating to win. Yet the exchange with contestants from other regions reminds me that I want to strive for better still. There is a lot I could learn from them.”

### Chai's the limit for top toques

Food and beverage teams from the Island Shangri-La and Hong Kong Cricket Club tied for first place in a recent contest to come up with innovative tea-based drinks and dishes.

From a choice of 28 teas, teams chose a minimum of four varieties to work with, including a tea cocktail and traditional black tea. Paired with the teas were two sweet and two savoury items, and one sweet and one savoury item using tea as an ingredient. An eight-category point-scoring system was used by the three judges – chefs Bernd Uber and Peter Kuruvita, and Dilhan Fernando.

“The challenge for our chefs was finding out how to use the teas in cooking. Which teas were good for using as a crust when pan searing? Or when baked, did the flavour overpower the tea? Dishes took weeks to develop,” says Simon Evans, executive chef of the Hong Kong Cricket Club.

Entries included blue cheese scones with sundried tomato jam – paired with Ceylon souchong, which worked, says Evans, because of the earthy, smoky flavours and rich taste of the tea complemented the creaminess and sharp tang of the cheese.

The Island Shangri-La team's dishes included chamomile tea with Jack Daniels paired with a smoked chicken sandwich. The dish worked, says pastry chef Alex Ng, because the “husky flavours in Jack Daniels complement perfectly the smoky flavour of the chicken, and the chamomile tea balances the bitterness”.

He said the biggest challenge was creating a mouthful of food that could fully embody the spirit of the teas.

The winning teams will get to attend Dilmah's School of Tea and compete against international teams next year. *Vicki Williams*



WINE OPINION  
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## Boutique offers chance for those with DIY attitude

A Bordeaux-based winery is stretching the “boutique” concept to its limit by offering clients the opportunity to create their own label for a single barrel – just 288 bottles of wine. Total production is limited to 195 barrels, or just under 4,700 cases a year. This is truly a small production.

If you want to become a Bordeaux winemaker you need between £6,900 (HK\$89,000) and £10,900 to spare, but you don't actually have to do any winemaking. While some customers show a curiosity about the actual process, others are really just in it for the wine.

“This is the solution for every romantic amateur winemaker out there,” says Berry Bros & Rudd's sales director for Asia, Simon Staples.

Viniv, a company founded by

French-American entrepreneur Stephen Bolger, owns 14 plots of vineyard across Bordeaux, and on both banks of the river. That means access to all the classic Bordeaux varieties – cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot and malbec. It also means access to the terroirs of Pauillac, Saint-Emilion, Saint Estephe, Canon Fronsac and Graves, among others.

The winemaking is in the hands of the team from Chateau Lynch-Bages, including Eric Boissenot, who is an adviser to four of the five Bordeaux 1855 first-classified growths. While vineyard tastings and blending sessions are part of the package, they are not compulsory. That hasn't stopped at least one client turning up for six separate sessions. While Bolger says the winemaking team would never



Viniv founder Stephen Bolger (left) and co-owner Jean-Charles Cazes.

“This is the solution for every romantic amateur wine maker out there

SIMON STAPLES, BERRY BROS & RUDD

directly contradict a customer's wishes, they would definitely nudge them away from a blend that wouldn't work.

One of four Hong Kong-based clients so far, actress and wine-lover Bernice Liu Bik-yi recently sold a single bottle from her own barrel at a mainland charity auction for 250,000 yuan (HK\$315,000).

The motivation for making the wine is not financial. One demographic targeted by the company is London bankers who have the money to spare. Other customers include families – many preparing to celebrate a wedding. Often these families will order a second barrel about a year later to celebrate the arrival of a baby.

With families being families, the barrels can also produce arguments. Should the barrel be kept for years or should it be drunk as soon as possible? What should go on the label? It's been known for clients to get round the first problem by ordering two barrels. The second can be resolved with two labels for a wine from a single barrel and the company employs two graphic designers to come up with labels for its customers.