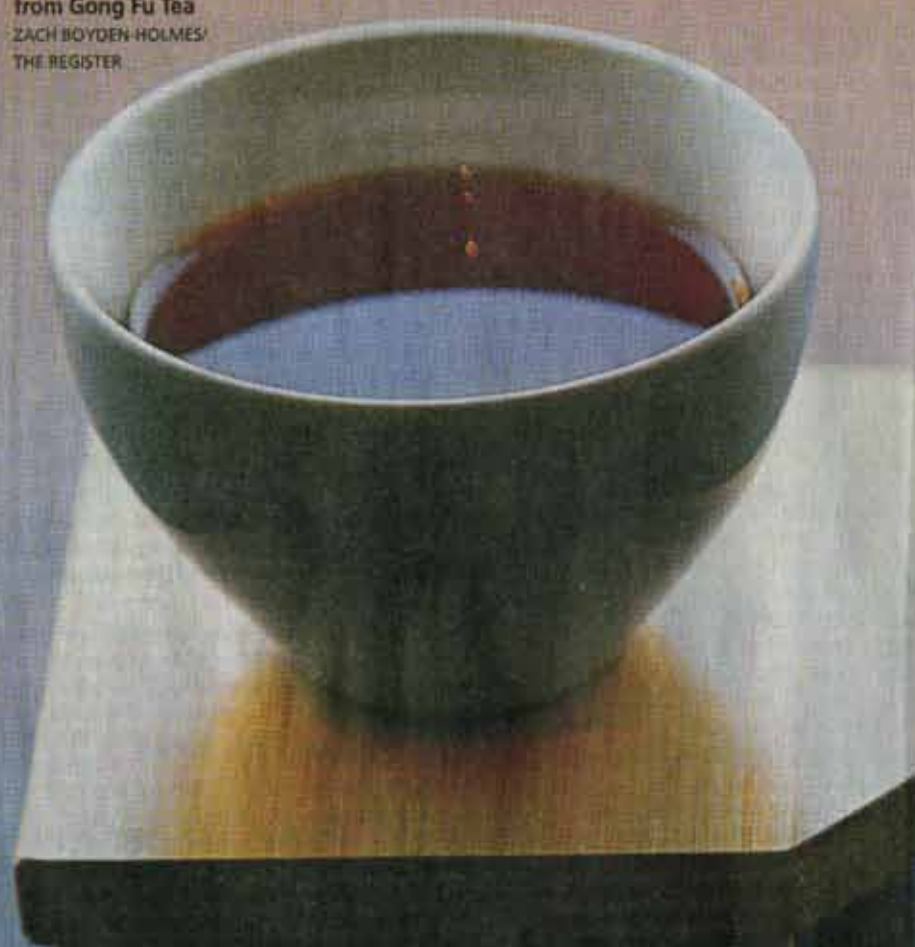


"Holiday Blend" tea
from Gong Fu Tea
ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/
THE REGISTER



TRY THESE 7 TEAS

Gong Fu co-owner Mike Feller shared his tea suggestions, depending on your mood or situation:

- » **Satisfying a sweet tooth:** No. 301 "Spice Tea," a black tea with a blend of spices
- » **Waking you up:** No. 352 "Kilimanjaro," a Tanzanian black tea that packs a lot of strength into a small leaf
- » **Soothing you to sleep:** No. 500 "Starry Night," an herbal tea infused with chamomile, peppermint, orange, fennel, rose and lavender
- » **Summer sipping:** No. 5 "La Pina Colada," a white tea blended with pineapple and coconut that tastes almost like the real thing when served over ice
- » **Drinking all day:** No. 202 "Monkey-Picked Ti Kwan Yin," a rare oolong
- » **Fans of fruitier flavors:** No. 121 "Cloud Nine," green tea blended with raspberry, rhubarb and strawberry
- » **Non tea drinkers:** No. 101 "Ancient Happiness," a green tea with a blend of sunflower, rose and cornflower petals.

Nothing takes the stress away like a cup of "Serenity Now" from Gong Fu Tea. The aromatic blend of peppermint and rose hip will take your stresses away. REGISTER FILE PHOTO



Mike Feller of Gong Fu Tea portions out bulk tea for a customer inside his East Village establishment in Des Moines earlier this month. CHARLIE LITCHFIELD/ THE REGISTER

TEA FORAY, FOR TWO

How two Iowa State University fraternity brothers built a thriving Eastern-inspired teahouse in their home state

By Brianne Sanchez
Special to the Register

Steaming water spills into the small sand-clay teapot and heats the relaxing monkey-picked oolong leaves inside. Another pour from the kettle, this time with the clay lid on, and excess water streams over the purplish pot and trickles into a decorative tray below.

The proprietor explains the importance of each step, his motions echo a Chinese process established in the mid-1300s. We wait as the water evaporates from the outside of the pot, a more poetic indicator that the first steeping is now ready for our tiny duo of porcelain cups.

This is the ceremonial Chinese "gong fu" style tea preparation — a small batch method of continual steeping. There is no rushing a gong fu tea preparation. Part of its pleasure is the time and ritual required before taking the first sip.

The tea unfurls different complexities in its flavor with each steeping, and because of the small pours, every sip is piping hot.

Steeped in friendship

Mike Feller's calm, almost reverential manner while presenting a gong fu service reveals the origins of the tea shop, aptly named Gong Fu Tea. Feller co-owns the

East Village shop in Des Moines with Rusty Bishop. It's the product of two college buddies who were driven by a passion for tea.

In reality, their quest to provide access to high-quality varieties from Assam to rooibos started out third fiddle to a friendship forged at Iowa State University and a desire to build something — it could have been nearly anything — that would give them both an exciting new challenge.

It was 2003. Feller wanted to leave the lumber company he was working for in Indiana, and Bishop was injecting his staid insurance and banking career with adrenaline via extreme racing events. The two met up in Chicago to brainstorm.

"We each took a legal pad and sat in the lobby of a hotel and started thinking of businesses," Feller says. "His were all in finance and mine were in logging."

At the end of Feller's list, inspired by a Food & Wine magazine article about tea shops, Feller added "teahouse."

"I remember the first cup of tea I liked," Feller says. "My mom bought a box of Constant Comment (Bigelow brand), and she made a cup for me."

A coffee guy until college, when he realized that method of "caffeinating" made him feel crummy, tea was Feller's pick-me-up drink of choice. He was a casual drinker, not a connoisseur. Still, he understood tea as a ritual.

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TEA

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"Tea is not something you get up with and get yourself going with first thing," Feller says. "It's more about taking time for yourself and relaxing and appreciating what you have around you."

A teahouse? Bishop was intrigued.

"I started thinking through the simplicity of it — if we were able to source good teas," he says. "It seemed uncomplicated."

Entrepreneurship takes hold

Almost immediately after that brainstorm in 2003, the business partners set their idea into motion, although Gong Fu Tea didn't open its doors until June of 2004.

They scoured phone books in Chicago for tea rooms and visited as many as they could. They expanded their research to visit businesses in coastal cities like Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Boston and New York City. Bishop estimates they visited 50-something total.

"We came back thinking we would build something that was special here," he said.

Feller grew up in Council Bluffs and Bishop on Des Moines' south side. While many may have questioned opening an Eastern-inspired tea shop — a concept that had barely begun to spring up on the coasts — in corn country, the Gong Fu guys had confidence.

"We understood people from the Midwest," Feller says. "It was our opinion that people (here) have the same sensibilities as people on the coasts, and we thought if we unveiled something here it would be embraced, and they'd be glad to have it sooner rather than later."

Feller and Bishop have developed a deep understanding and appreciation for tea varieties that range from recognizable Earl Greys to the magical-sounding Ceylon silver striped. They have conducted focus groups in Des Moines to get the feel

of the market and they recognized the potential of the burgeoning East Village scene. Gong Fu and the neighborhood have both flourished.

Now, the neighboring East Village Spa offers a Gong Fu chai scrub and honey massage treatment (\$75) among its menu of services — inspired by owner Cassie Sampson's morning ritual of enjoying a chai latte on her way to work.

Midwestern market, and beyond

Business has grown steadily since Feller and Bishop first remodeled the former Antler's Bar & Grill and painted the walls a calming mint green. Stacks of silver canisters (Gong Fu has 145 varieties listed on its most recently printed menu) and shelves of tea wares give the space a museum-like ambience. It's hushed, unhurried. Wasabi peas and dried apricots are among the few snacks available, but the vibe is decidedly different from a coffee shop.

About 50 Gong Fu Tea regulars keep a tab because they come in so often to enjoy a cup or frequently buy in bulk.

New mom Caeli Esser turned to tea when she got pregnant last year in an attempt to cut down on her caffeine intake.

"The woman who helped me was so sweet and helped me navigate their huge menu of teas," Esser says. She found the shop's herbal "Serenity Now" blend of rose hips, petals and peppermint helped soothe her morning sickness. "I ended up trying four different types, and was happy to see that many of their options were really affordable. I was back a few weeks later to get four more varieties."

Many former Des Moines residents who have moved, like David Lay of Cleveland, satisfy their Gong Fu cravings by ordering through the store's website.

"I really love the selection and the knowledge the employees have," he says. "It keeps me coming back, even ordering online. My go-to order is the 'Ginger Peach Organic.'



CHARLIE LITCHFIELD/ THE REGISTER

GONG FU TEA

FIND IT: 414 E. Sixth St.
HOURS: 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday, 7 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday
CONTACT: 515-288-3388; www.gongfu-tea.com

I'm a sucker for peach tea, and the added ginger adds a nice spicy note."

Embracing the lifestyle

The lasting success of Gong Fu Tea seems to derive from the studied preparation it takes to become a master of one's art. It's that mentality that inspired Feller and Bishop to train their staff and to travel to the plantations from which they were sourcing their teas and meet directly with purveyors.

They developed relationships in places like Taiwan, touring and sampling products straight from the fields. They've cupped Darjeeling in its namesake northern Indian district and ventured to Nepal to experience tea high in the Himalayas.

In reality, every day as an entrepreneur isn't exactly sipping tea on a colonial estate as the sun rises over the hills. With spouses and growing children, lengthy trips abroad are less frequent. But Bishop would say there's still a sense of adventure in figuring out all of the facets of the business. Training knowledgeable staff, writing tea descriptions, developing a website — and doing it all with an appreciate-the-moment ethos that honors the lifestyle of a tea purveyor — takes skill through practice. When done right, it flows like steaming chai into a porcelain cup.