

# D.M. tea shop hits the spot for owners, customers

**Y**ou hear stories all the time about guys going through midlife crises — having affairs, changing jobs, having affairs, having hair transplants, buying BMW convertibles, having affairs, losing weight, joining the Green Party, having affairs.

But how do you get to that point in life when you quit your job with a bank or a lumber company, move to Iowa and open a tea shop on the east side of Des Moines?

A place like Gong Fu Tea, where you can get cups and kettles, timers, tea-scented candles, spoons and 118 different kinds of loose-leaf tea — from Ancient Happiness and Liquid Yoga to Gunpowder No. 2 and Sword of the Emperor.

A place where, according to co-owner Rusty Bishop, “you can buy everything you need for the perfect tea experience.”

A year ago, Bishop didn't know there was a perfect tea experience. He knew what most of us know — you put the tea bag in



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the cup, pour the water, let it sit a minute and drink.

But these days, Bishop can talk about the finer points of chai, about the oxidation process, caffeine content and the various times it takes for the various teas to reach their peak.

He knows the top four tea countries: China, India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. He

knows that Japan exports only 1 percent of its tea — “they drink the rest.” He's traveled along both U.S. coasts looking at tea shops. He's been to China. He's just getting started.

Bishop is from Des Moines — Lincoln, '87. His business partner, Mike Feller, grew up in Council Bluffs. The two met at ISU, went their separate ways after college and hooked up again last September in Chicago. They talked about starting a business together.

So how did this guy, a banker, team up with a pal working as a forester with an Indiana lumber company and open a tea shop?

“We're old friends, and we were just looking for something to do, something different. At first we looked at things we both knew about, like investment services, logging, lumber management, a wine bar. We had about two dozen ideas. But Mike saw this show about tea on the food channel,

and he read a magazine article about these shops opening around the country. We just started looking into it last September, and then we decided this was what we wanted to do.”

They opened the East Village shop last month, and it's catching on.

People come in for a cup and come back for a pot. They bring friends and relatives. They do little tours of the shop — from the front walls lined with various cups and saucers to the eight-seat Japanese tearoom in the back. They sniff and sample the Golden Xuan — an oolong from the hills of



**Bishop**

**Feller**

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China's Fujian province — and they buy a few ounces of the Monkey-Picked Ti Kwan Yin, “from ancient unpruned trees that produce leaves that are so far off the ground only monkeys can pick them.”

It's not just the tea. It's the whole deal. The soft lighting, the Asian music, the mint-green paint on the walls.

It's the kind of place where you wouldn't want to use the F-word, tell a dirty joke or even raise your voice.

You might want to sit in the front room at one of a dozen seats and read “Feng Shui for Beginners.”

Or you might gather with a few friends in the back, sit barefoot on pillows and quietly discuss harmonic convergence.

It's the kind of place Kristyna Solawetz was looking for a few weeks ago when she was at the Des Moines Arts Festival, feeling overwhelmed by the noise and crowds. She was looking for an antidote, and she found Gong Fu Tea. Solawetz is 18 and works at Pioneer in Johnston. One afternoon last week, she was sitting on the floor of the tearoom with her sister and a friend, sipping Shanghai Sunrise.

Her take on it is pretty much what you hear from other customers in the room.

“I came in once, and now I just keep coming back, bringing people with me. I love this atmosphere.”

This is what Feller and Bishop were hoping for. This is what Feller expected.

“I just felt it was time. I felt the city was ready for something like this.”

He's talking and he's spooning some Mediterranean Chamomile into a cup.

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