

# OCWEEKLY

## STAR LORDS

THANKS IN PART TO THE ORANGE COUNTY ASTRONOMERS & ITS DESERT CLUBHOUSE, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IS HEAVEN FOR AMATEUR STARGAZERS

BY MEGAN BRESCINI



◦ PLUS ◦

TRANQUIL'S BODACIOUS TEA

TRENDZILLA: IT'S CLOG, CLOG, CLOG!



» TEA

# Bodacious Tea

The proprietors of Tranquil Tea Lounge do it all for the love of the leaf

BY EDWIN GOEI

I drink lots of tea. I've sipped countless cups at Hong Kong-style dim sum houses, stuck my pinky finger aloft at Ritz Carlton's exorbitant afternoon-tea ceremony and sucked the brew through oversized straws at innumerable Chinese tea joints that also peddle boba.

Tranquil Tea Lounge is nothing like any of those. Its proprietors treat the leaves with the care of meticulous curators, the inspiration of mad inventors, the zeal of passionate advocates. This place revels in tea. It celebrates tea. If there were a graduate course in tea, an internship here would be a requirement.

"The folks who own this place are self-professed tea snobs," a fellow sipper told me. Are they ever. With an encyclopedic menu that catalogs every conceivable and not-so-conceivable permutation of teas black, green, oolong, white, pu-erh, rooibos, maté, herbal and tisane, one could visit for a hundred consecutive days and never taste the same drink twice.

For every tea, you have to decide whether you want it iced or hot. Choose iced, and you'll receive not only a tall, sweaty glass, but also an extra carafe to top it off. Opt for hot, and your server—who may be owner Michelle Phelps or her brother, Jonathan Munsayac—will pour hot water into a strainer-equipped teapot to brew your chosen leaves.

The iced ones are prepared at the bar. Leaves are measured from silver canisters that line a shelf like those at an old apothecary's shop. The tea is then steeped, sweetened and shaken with ice, as if it were a martini. Next to the register is a sniffing station, with all the varieties stored in tiny jars.

Sip any tea slowly, so its perfumes can climb up your nostrils, tickling receptors you never knew you had.

The popular Asian Pear—a sweet, green-tea-based nectar that drinks as easy as breathing—is brewed by steeping exotic tea leaves along with dried fruit and/or spices. This process applies to most of Tranquil's blends. Some are subtle. Some are bold. A few are seriously pedigreed, such as the Ti Kuan Yin Monkey Picked Oolong, which, according to legend, was once actually harvested by trained primates. Plus, there are those with cocktail titles such as Fijian Sunset, African Princess and My First Crush. The descriptions and components listed under them are as exhaustive as wine vintages or herbal supplements, yet they are as fun to order as they are to suck through a straw.

The slightly tannic Mauna Loa, is a mixture of green tea, almonds, white chocolate bits, macadamia and pistachio nuts, Roman chamomile flowers, cocoa kernels, and cracknel bits. The composition of my Chili Truffle beverage included black tea, cocoa bits, chili, white chocolate and pink peppercorns. I was more relieved than disappointed that the brew was more chocolatey than spicy.

Except for the occasional Englishman, Tranquil's target demographic are females of a certain age and predilection who were woefully underserved in a downtown known mostly for testosterone-fueled rock & roll bars and boozy cantinas. Since its debut last June, this tea lounge has been embraced as a refuge. A private banquet room has been the site of many bridal showers and mom-blog

DAINTY, YET ALSO FOR DUDES



KIMBERLY VALENZUELA

gatherings. (Tip for those of us with Y chromosomes: You will be outnumbered.)

Light salads and half-sandwiches are the preferred things to nibble here. Nobody orders the full sandwiches: Tranquil's permanent \$8 special includes a choice of half a sandwich, side salad or soup of the day, along with your choice of almost any tea.

The soups, by the way, are glorious in and of themselves. One day, Tranquil offered a tomato-basil bisque topped with grated Parmesan that was a natural bridge to the melty three-cheese panini I dunked into it. A chicken-rice soup I had on an earlier visit featured grains bloated to tapioca-like proportions—the closest thing you'll get to boba here. There's some serious *Top Chef* precision plating going on with the Hawaiian poke salad, a cylindrical platform of cubed ahi crowned by an avocado halo and surrounded by greaseless baked wonton crisps.

And of course, sweets. A warm chocolate

chip, peanut butter and banana scone crumbles as beautifully as the chocolate and caramel sauce swirled on the plate. The crispy-yet-chewy French macarons are stuffed with teeth-rotting fillings that actually taste like the flavors they're supposed to represent.

Me? I prefer to close with the North End Float, which is a chilled glass of cocoa and pu-erh tea with a scoop of vanilla ice cream dropped into it. The malty-ness reminded me of glasses of Ovaltine I had as a kid. I drank it after a few bites of their dainty cream puffs, which were cute as buttons. Yes, I said "buttons." Hey, I'm secure enough in my manhood to count Tranquil as my new hangout. What about the rest of you dudes?

**TRANQUIL TEA LOUNGE**  
106 W. Wilshire Ave., Fullerton, (714) 869-3577;  
www.tranquiltealounge.com. Open Mon.-Sat.,  
9 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sun, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.  
Teas, \$4-\$5; food, \$3-\$9.

## Chicken, Persian Style

**HEN HOUSE GRILL**  
18040-A Culver Dr., Irvine, (949) 786-2000.

It's a bold move to open an Iranian restaurant in Irvine next to Wholesome Choice, the garden of grocery delights whose buffet beats most of the county's Persian eateries and whose bakery draws half-hour-long lines solely for its sangak flatbread. Hen House Grill knows this. It offers good versions of what's next door: various stews ranging from a sweet fessenjoon to an earthy eggplant version, a couple of polos (the flavored rice pilafs that make Persian dining so memorable) and soups. But those are afterthoughts, items best bought at Wholesome Choice. They won't mind.

Hen House Grill replaced a Charo Chicken a couple of months ago and decided to keep the emphasis on the bird. And boy, do they ever with their ground chicken over rice; koobideh skewers; chicken kabob; whole rotisserie-style hens that rotate round and round until their juices seep into every last strip of flesh, and the skin shines with crispiness; wings; Cornish game hens; kotlets, the intriguing Iranian dish that mixes meat with potato, onion and eggs, creating a fried patty worthy of a thousand Rumi babblings; chicken wraps prepared with Hen House's freshly baked lavash, crisped perfectly as if it were a flour tortilla; and olvieh, a chicken salad spruced up with olive oil and a dash of green peas.

They even went so far as to keep the chicken quesadillas and burritos. I wish I could say they added sumac or saffron to Iranianize it, but they're as pleasingly pedestrian as Charo's offerings. In all the dishes, the chicken impresses: succulent, tender, with subtle charring to give a smoky aftertaste. They even offer chicken mortadella, which gives the maligned sausage cut some much-deserved prestige and has a subtle kick.

This place also sells some items listed on the in-store menu that curiously don't make it into the takeout edition. Lamb tongue sandwich is so wrong in so many ways, but the velvety texture and buttery flavor of the poor sheep's organ, slightly grilled and lightly decorated with olive oil, is too delicious to ignore because of mere ethics. Stranger still is the bandari sandwich: beef sausage doused with curry, in a French roll alongside pickles—a Chicago dog via Tehran. I never knew Iranians ate curry, although it makes geographical sense, and the curry they offer is light and milky like the Vietnamese version. But the addition of straightforward dill pickles is bizarre: Persian cuisine has its home-grown pickles—brutally soured torshi—so why the watered-down American take? Whatever—it works. Offer this sandwich at a ballpark and watch Joe Six-Pack transform from a dittohead into an anti-ayatollah freedom fighter.

GARELLANO@OCWEEKLY.COM

**BLOG ON » FOOD**  
STICK A FORK IN IT

Edwin's Daily Dish | Gustavo's Top Dives  
Local Eats | Cheap Plates | Hot Dates  
[BLOGS.OCWEEKLY.COM/](http://BLOGS.OCWEEKLY.COM/)  
STICKAFORKINIT