



Tea Shop Owners Like Their Leaves Loose

Kim Nguyen runs The Loose Teas with co-owner Cindy Thai.

Kim Nguyen, who has been running The Loose Teas shop in Monrovia for nearly six years, says she found her vocation "just sort of by luck." Originally, Nguyen's brother ran the business, but when he decided to pursue another line of work, she changed the name and the focus of the venture. "When the opportunity came, I just decided to go for it. Before it was more dessert, boba and ice cream. Now it's more of a specialty tea cafe with gifts."

Nguyen currently runs the shop with business partner Cindy Thai. When it comes to the store's offerings, the two like to keep it loose. "We try to have fun with the teas and make a lot of concoctions," Thai said. "Sometimes I feel kind of like a mad scientist."

Nguyen said that the tea at their shop is unlike much of the standard bagged tea sold in grocery stores, which is very processed. The store likes to focus on natural flavors and ingredients. The shop carries around a hundred types of tea. "We wanted lots of varieties, true flavor, and health benefits, too."

In order to select their teas, Nguyen and Thai sample as many teas as possible and attend trade shows twice a year. "It's fun. You get really wired with all the

caffeine they give you," Nguyen said. "We'll just drink lots and lots of tea and from there we'll decide if we like it enough to carry it."

"We'll try the same tea probably twenty different times. It's kind of tedious, but it's worth it because we want every tea we carry in the shop to be a really great-tasting tea," she added. In addition to meeting vendors and sampling teas, Nguyen enjoys learning from the educational programs at the shows, and has picked up lessons from many tea ceremonies.

One of the international tea-drinking customs she enjoys involves the tradition of drinking mate from Argentina. Nguyen said that the person who prepares the mate drinks it first, and then passes it to others.

by ALLISON ROESKE
photographs by J. WESLEY BASSARD

"It's very social. You drink it out of a gourd with a bombilla," she said, explaining that a bombilla is a kind of straw that has tiny holes in it. "It's an infuser, actually, so that you can drink the tea without getting any of the leaves" she said.

Nguyen said she enjoys running a business in Monrovia and appreciates it's street fair and the "small-town feel." Although she loves to offer high quality teas, she doesn't want to intimidate those who might pass up the shop because they aren't as familiar with its specialty offerings.

"Tea does not have to be so proper, with rules. I want people to be able to come in and explore and try new flavors," she said. "I want quality tea, and I want it to be accessible to everyone. We take tea very seriously but we like to have a lot of fun with it, too."

