

TURNING TOWARD TEA

BY CHERYL KOEHLER

According to Ahmed Rahim, Co-founder of Oakland's Numi tea company, it was that danged tea party in Colonial Boston a few centuries ago that turned Americans away from the genteel English habit of taking afternoon tea. Out of spite over unfair taxation, we turned ourselves into a nation of coffee drinkers. And now look what we've become—a nation of people who drink most of their coffee out of paper cups.

Granted, here in the Bay Area we occupy a more rarified place on the rim of our nation's history. Since the California Gold Rush, we've been a melting pot of Eastern tea-drinking cultures and a magnet for people with the sensibilities to appreciate the art of tea. But lately, tea seems to be taking a new hold in the East Bay with some striking innovations.

The extent of this creativity became apparent to me early this Spring when I arrived at the decommissioned Alameda Naval Air Station, where an old airplane hanger now houses a craft-distillery called St. George Spirits. Taking up the invitation to fly high on spirits and caffeine at the same time, I was attending the launch of a new product—Qi—a craft-distilled liqueur made with tea.

The fevered brain behind Qi is a charming man named Brian Backus—one of those people who makes you ask the question, "why do people choose vocations to match their names?" Backus tells of his long-standing interest in "things that aid digestion," such as herbal teas and old-fashioned herbal liqueurs like Chartreuse, Fernet Branca, and Jägermeister. The crafting of medicinal liqueurs dates back to Hippocrates (the founder of Western medicine), but Backus notes that no new herbal liqueurs have been created in the last hundred years—until now.

Teaming up with Master Distiller Lance Winters of St. George Spirits and Master Taster John Scharffenberger of Scharffenberger Cellars and Scharffen Berger Chocolate Maker, Backus experimented for two years before arriving at Qi—a triple-cold-infused liqueur made with Lapsang Souchong, a tea that achieves its distinctive smoky flavor from the drying heat of a cedar wood fire. The other flavors that come through in Qi are a mild sweetness from

wildflower honey, a velvety smoothness from chardonnay brandy, and the exotic scents of vanilla and mandarin blossom.

"We tested hundreds of flavors and blends before we settled on Lapsang Souchong," he says, mentioning that experiments with traditional medicinal herbs such as nettles, angelica root, and milk thistle had been far less inspiring. By expanding the range to include tea, they had forged into all new terrain.

Winters, whose Hanger One Vodka has been making waves of its own across the San Francisco Bay and beyond since it appeared in 2001, believes that these innovations are being supported by interest from "a younger generation with untainted palates." But even the older folks gathered at his airplane hanger that night were happily sticking their noses into sniffers of Qi served "neat" and schmoozing over various Qi cocktails. They contemplated the concepts of Qi Manhattans and martinis, and a Qi Irish coffee called Waking Buddha, and quite a few of us took up the invitation for High Tea—Qi mixed one part to three into steaming hot cups of Lapsang Souchong and Earl Grey.

While sipping my second High Tea at the attractive tea bar, which the Numi tea company had installed for the party, I found myself mesmerized by the products on display. Some "flowering teas" were blossoming inside glass teapots illuminated from below with warming candles, and a collection of dry, unopened flowering tea buds lay inside a bamboo box on the bar. On asking about this treasure, I learned that flowering tea (like Backus's tea liqueur) is a concept that is very recently emerged.

"Some farmer in Yunnan Province invented it about five years ago," said Numi Co-founder Ahmed Rahim, recounting how he began finding the hand sewn tea flowers at tea gardens (plantations) while on his buying expeditions in China. In adding them to the Numi product line, he and Reem Rahim (his sister and Numi Co-founder) coined the name, "flowering tea," to explain the concept to English-speaking tea drinkers.

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Numi's Flowering Tea