

VANCOUVER RARE TEA BARS

On a chilly Vancouver afternoon I was strolling along 4th Avenue when the beautiful, 16th Century-inspired wooden door of one of the shops caught my attention. I ran across the street to find the grand door open and a man gesturing me to come in. The aroma of honeyed flowers' and the warmth at the entranceway calmed my shivering as I walked through the door. People were sipping rich red, purple, and light green concoctions from a variety of glass and ceramic vessels. A server poured a steaming dark green liquid into a grey ceramic cup and handed it to me as I took a seat at the Zen inspired wooden bar. Pedro, the fellow who greeted me at the door, explained that what I was about to drink was a rare tea called Balhyocha Noeul which had been cultivated and harvested from Korea. The warm tea had an incredible aroma of chocolate with raisins but the taste, which I enjoyed, was surprisingly citrusy.

This is one of the amazing rare teas that 05 Rare Tea Bar served me that day. Tea hunter, Pedro Villalon, is a master of tea. He selects the finest quality tea from micro farms around the world and has them shipped to his Zen-like tea spot on 4th Avenue in Vancouver. Pedro and his staff educate even the most knowledgeable tea aficionados during tea services that start at 10:00 a.m. and go until as late as 11:00 p.m. Even the savviest sippers can learn a lot during the informative tea experience here.

Villalon explains that 05 represents the five elements of earth, air, water, fire and void while the 'O' stands for, "...our obsession with Origin...We travel the world learning about the soil on which our tea grows and the people who care for it. Because healthier, better earth yields the teas that we want to share". Villalon's dedication to finding the finest tea is evident as I try a twenty-one-year-old rare Oolong tea which is earthy in smell and has a pure, slightly grassy taste. As I sit on a specially built tall, metal tea stool, perfectly designed to maintain proper posture for the tea experience, Pedro explains that the taste of each tea depends on the amount of rain and sun the crop had before it was harvested.

Issha Marie, a server at the bar, told me that rare tea is unique because it can only be harvested in small amounts in remote locations where the soil is able to produce the tea; rare tea is tea that is sought after but difficult to find. Issha serves me a cold infusion of Golden Curls, a rare white tea that is refreshingly light and slightly earthy in taste. As for the benefits of such teas, Issha explains that all tea is beneficial for health. Golden Curls is a calming tea, however, there is really no added benefit, other than the taste and experience between rare tea and tea that is more abundant. Health benefits aside, this is one of the best cold teas I've ever tried.

My afternoon at 05 Rare Tea Bar was memorable and set the bar high as I headed to another Vancouver hot tea spot, Shaktea Tea on Main Street. The name Shaktea is inspired by the Hindu goddess symbolic of divine feminine energy and harmony, a suitable name as I immediately felt a sense of calm as I walked into the gorgeous space with flickering pots of tea keeping warm atop lit candles. Sitar music soothed my senses as I took a seat on a comfortable chair with an extraordinary Indian crafted ornamental cushion. If the tea matches the décor and atmosphere I was in for quite a treat.

Struck by the large variety of tea at Shaktea I became lost in reading the menu of Oolong, Black, White, Herbal, Pu'er and other teas. The incredible assortment of tea each details the ingredients, the smell of the tea, and how each tea will taste. Despite being wooed by descriptions like, "Soft and buttery aroma of cream", or, "...aroma of peaches and warm honey", I chose a rare Pu'er tea called Yushou Mountain Pu'er (2007). Pu'er is a blend of post-fermented dark tea which is produced in the Yunnan province of China and is known for its aid in digestion. Served in a delicate, clear glass tea pot the rich dark colour of toffee glistened through and I could smell subtle earthy tones sweetened by a citrusy sun. The taste was earthy with a hint of sweetness but much stronger than I had anticipated for the first infusion.

Like 05 Rare Tea Bar, Shaktea Tea is a tea merchant as well as an establishment that offers a tea service. Marie Ma, owner of Shaktea Tea, explains that her objective is to educate the consumer on all different types of tea. Marie opened some of the most fragrant tins of tea from around the world to show me the quality of tea and to let me take in some of the remarkable aromas that these teas offer. One of the highlights of my day was in the delight I took breathing in the incredible fragrance of tea such as pearl jasmine, organic ginger, guava melon, and gingerbread Pu'er.

Each tea that I tasted, smelled, held in my hand and enjoyed that day was memorable, however, the story of how fine tea is cultivated and produced at the hands of the passionate tea farmer is equally incredible. So much effort and history goes into each tea crop that is cultivated and harvested before we are able to sit in tea shops like 05 Rare Tea Bar and Shaktea Tea and enjoy their fine tea. Understanding and reflecting on the effort that goes into the art of tea should be a part of every tea experience.

05 Rare Tea Bar located at 2088 4th Avenue in Vancouver

Shaktea Tea located at 3702 Main Street in Vancouver

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