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## FOOD

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ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Manager** Justin Burke serves Chinese tea in the traditional setting of the Imperial Tea Court in the Great Wall Shopping Mall in Kent. It is one of many places to sample teas in the Seattle area.

## STEEPED in TRADITION

*Tearooms in the Seattle area offer a respite from the harried life  
and dispense doses of serenity*

BY KIMBERLY B. MARLOWE  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

It's still a lovely one-word question: "Tea?"

For all the caffeinated hype around here, where convoluted orders like double-tall, extra hot, nonfat with a shot of mango-tulip flavoring are the norm, we still experience a certain lift of the heart when someone asks us to pause and join them for a nice cuppa tea.

And, with apologies to chai drinkers and aficionados of sweetened, bottled things with "tea" in the name . . . we're thinking serious tea here, served up by someone who knows and loves the stuff.

Oh, you might think that in these coffee-clogged times, you'll be hard-pressed to find a handy tea establishment. But not to worry; there is surely a tearoom near you. Too many to list them all, in fact. Instead we offer a sampling of all manner of places -- from the simple to the elegant -- that nicely feed

the need for that certain serenity, found only in a teacup.

### **Tea as it was meant to be**

Flanked by Asian groceries and herb sellers in the Great Wall Shopping Mall, the new Imperial Tea Court serves its wares with deliberate ceremony and calm.

The Chinese tea rituals demonstrated here are thousands of years removed from what most of us consider tea-making -- dunking a cheap tea bag into any old ceramic coffee mug.

Still, the rules of this ritual might not be exactly what you'd expect. "It is perfectly acceptable -- even preferable -- to slurp your tea," says regional manager Justin Burke, explaining that a good loud slurp actually helps maximize the opportunity to taste the drink.

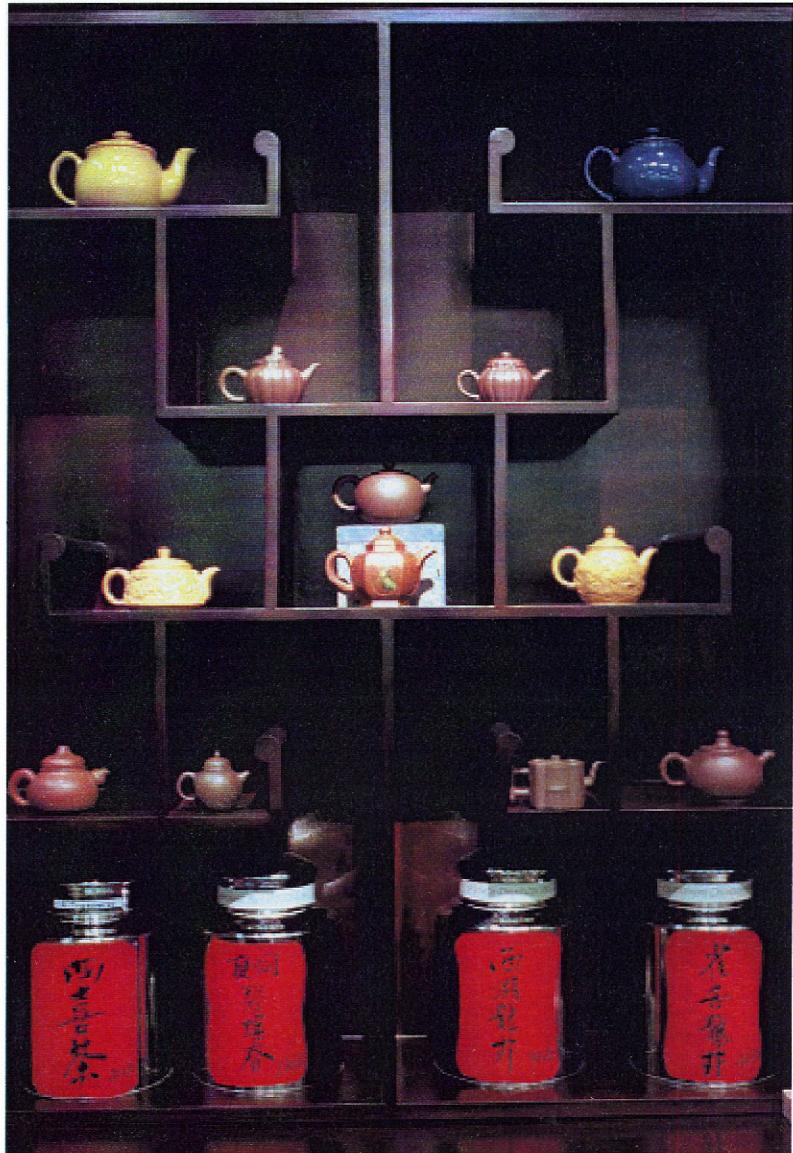
As my companions and I slurp enthusiastically, Burke repeats his demonstration, showing the proper way to heat the unglazed clay Yixing teapot with hot, purified water. He then warms up the white ceramic pitchers, "smelling cups" and tiny bowls from which we will drink our Monkey-Picked Tie Guan Yin oolong tea. (No, monkeys no longer pick the stuff. But the name sounds so cool that it stuck.)

The point of the Chinese ritual, while less formal than the more prolonged ceremonial Japanese tea-making, is still to savor the fine tea, first enjoying the rich, almost haunting scent, then slowly tasting the briefly steeped brew. The quality of the tea leaves is so high that a seemingly endless number of the tiny cups can be made from the same pot.

This is not only a relaxing experience, it's a bargain: By the time our \$5 per person tea ceremony ends, the three of us have used about an ounce of the special oolong, which sells for about \$180 a pound.

The well-appointed Kent store, which held its grand opening last month, sells a variety of tea-making accessories and about 50 types of tea -- including some extremely rare varieties. It is owned by Roy and Grace Fong, who also own the Imperial Tea Court on San Francisco's Powell Street.

The Imperial Tea Court is located in the Great Wall Shopping Mall, 18230 E. Valley Highway in Kent, 425-251-8191. Best to make reservations for groups, or to use the small pri-



**Teapots**, mainly from China, and canisters holding different teas adorn the walls of the Imperial Tea Court.

vate tearoom.

Web site: [www.imperialtea.com](http://www.imperialtea.com) (Once on the site, select icons for "Directory," then "Teapots," finally clicking on "Classroom" for interesting history lessons on Chinese tea rituals.) ...