



The Tea House is home to a unique selection of stunning whole leaf teas

A WHOLE NEW LEAF

NATALIE MILLAR-PARTRIDGE enjoys a visit to a business dedicated to the perfect brew

The House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle is a Tea House extraordinaire, based in Exeter. Owners James Penzer and Jane L. Ostins cite themselves as being ‘champions of proper tea and creative adventures’.

The Tea House is home to a unique selection of stunning whole leaf teas encompassing a wide range of single origin tea and house blends, from pure white leaves right through to Pu erh.

James describes the ethos behind the new tea venture as embracing the different, with a great design function and aesthetic in equal measure.

He enthuses: “Tea is about slow living and lends itself to that mindset. Taking a moment to enjoy a cup of tea is an art. People seem to have forgotten how easy and enjoyable good leaf tea can be. We want to encourage everyone to drink really good tea every day.”

James has been passionate about tea for as long as he can remember with Jane’s enthusiasm growing over the last ten years, in particular when she met James.

“We’re self-taught and extremely passionate about extraordinary and interesting teas. The more I learn, the more interested I become,” says Jane.



Jungle Brew is James and Jane’s own English breakfast blend

FIVE TIPS FOR ENJOYING THE PERFECT BREW

- Use loose leaves, as this will always enhance the flavour of your tea.
- Learn the provenance.
- Adjust the water temperature to suit the type of tea you’re brewing: white - 80 degrees, green - 75/80 degrees, Oolong - 90 degrees, black and dark - 95 degrees.
- Take your time for tea and use good quality leaves – don’t be afraid to experiment.
- Tea is always better when shared!

The couple have been running their own tea venture for the past five years, having started out at markets and events, providing their diverse tea selection - along with an array of homemade cakes - from a bicycle.

“We started out selling tea and cake from our Bakfiets, Dutch work bike at Chagford village market. Everyone loved the range of teas we offered and from there it’s evolved naturally and is continuing to grow. We’re now building on our own range of blends for your everyday favourites too,” says James.

The Tea House is a unique space where tea-lovers can fully embrace the finest blends - with its original layout, striking aesthetic and quirky packaging; it’s perfect for browsing and sampling as much as it is geared to buying. The shelves are filled with beautifully presented, hand-illustrated teas - an adventure of the senses with warm wood panels, red rugs, green jungle-painted murals and a gold ceiling, all fragranced with beautiful tea. The Tea House provides high grade, whole leaf tea, sourced from the far reaches of the globe, selected through rigorous tasting and research, working together with independent growers, factories, importers and wholesalers the world over.

“We test all of our teas regularly to ensure they are free from agricultural chemicals. It is so important to build trusted relationships with our suppliers to be assured that good sustainable, ethical practices are in place within both environment and community in an ever-growing industry. We are lucky to work with some immensely knowledgeable and skilled people, crafting some fine high-grade whole leaf tea,” adds James.

No two days are the same at the Tea Merchants, yet everyday involves drinking copious amounts of the finest leaves.

“We’re researchers, tasters, blenders, experimenters, designers, printers, packers, organisers, photographers, website editors, promoters, cleaners, van drivers, accountants as well as shop assistants! It’s just a two-person venture and we share all the jobs,” says Jane.

James and Jane seek out the finest large leaves, high-grade with provenance and amazing depth of flavour. “In the vast world of tea, there are so many different varieties and processes, just as you think you know something, someone comes along and blows your mind with something new,” explains Jane.

“Our clients are currently excited about Earl Grey, it seems to be having a moment! We’re currently enthusing about our Phoenix Mountain Dan Cong Oolongs (tea from ancient wild growing trees) picked by hand and carefully processed under the guidance of Tea Master Song Lin, creating the most delicate fruity floral notes.



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“Also we’re particularly happy to be building up a range of Pu erh and dark teas, compressed, fermented and aged teas, that are completely different and complex - like fine wines and whisky. We’re also currently sourcing some compressed white tea, which is very exciting.”

The original packaging is certainly designed to capture people’s attention, but it’s the whole large leaf tea - selected by tea drinkers for tea drinkers that gets people excited to trial.

“Our DIY approach means everything is made with care and attention-to-detail, it seems to resonate with people in this fast paced digital age,” says James.

Exeter Tea Merchants will be hosting regular Chinese Tea Ceremony events as well as some tea-tasting. The tea-loving duo also hope to offer a bit of knowledge for those looking to learn more about the nation’s most-loved beverage.

“There is a science behind tea - the provenance and terroir of tea has a large influence on the finished product. The soil, air, rain of every individual area creates a unique flavour profile for each tea. With the different types of processing the variety is nearly endless,” enthuses James.

I leave the Tea Merchants, with a much wider knowledge of my beverage of choice, inspired to research future tea purchases and excited to trial some new leaves.

“Tea is essentially one plant that has a vast history, it’s been ingrained in daily life, around the world for thousands of years, widely celebrated for its calming and energising properties. It’s also a sociable drink - a small ritual to connect with something bigger than yourself,” says Jane. ■

thehouseofhopeandmercyinthejungle.co.uk



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JAMES AND JANE’S TOP TEA RECOMMENDATIONS

Jungle Brew: our own English breakfast blend, classically strong and malty it was our first blend and will always have a special place on our shelf.

Wuyi Mountain Rock Teas: right now we’re tasting a lot of different Shui Xian - they’re deliciously dark and roasty and vary enormously between everyday drinking and high-grade ancient trees varieties.

Genmaicha: for its warm nutty comfort.

Tea Master Song Lins Feng Haung Hong Cha: the perfect balance of fragrance, fruit and depth.

Baotang (raw Pu erh) 2012: green and mellow, a little touch of smoke - because if all the others got washed into the sea, this is the one we’d run into the waves to save!