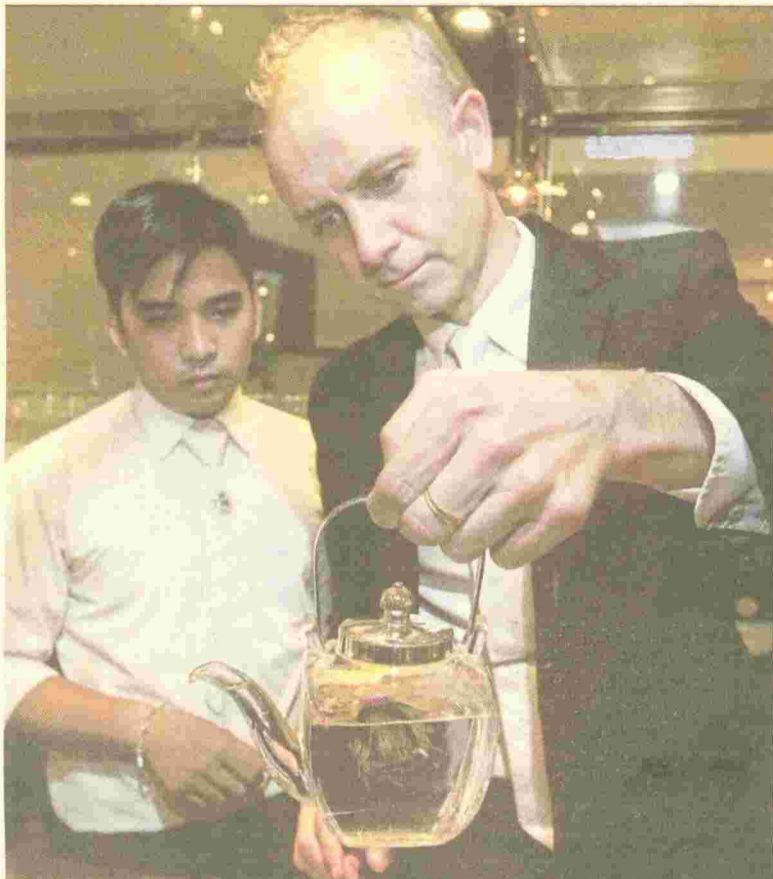


LIFE&TIMES LIVING



Dimitri Zampar (right) demonstrates methods for brewing a cup of tea.
PICTURES BY SHIRAZ ALI



Yellow Gold Tea Buds, ... a pot will cost more than RM400.



A fine harvest of teas

An afternoon spent at a luxury tea salon offers **Aneeta Sundararaj** insight into fine teas

IN an office full of coffee addicts, mention the word "tea" and see what happens. Some may balk, some will tell you about the best teh tarik they've ever had and some will narrow their eyes at you as though you've uttered a swear word. What cannot be denied, however, is that there is a growing number throughout the world who are making a conscious decision to drink tea instead of coffee. They say that when they think of tea, their mind automatically switches from being "on the go" to "relax, take time out and chill".

This is precisely what we hope will happen when we are given a "tea tutorial" about the recently launched Iced Teabags Collection by TWG Tea. We leave behind the tension-filled atmosphere of the city and step into the TWG Tea Salon at the Pavilion Kuala Lumpur.

Our host for the tutorial is Dimitri Zampar, the 42-year-old training manager of TWG Tea. Within minutes, this former footballer starts to enthusiastically rattle off details about tea, its origin, how it's produced and the company.

TWG Tea was established in Singapore in 2007, but its logo displays 1837. This is to commemorate the year the island nation became

a trading post for teas, spices and epicurean products. The company is committed to offering luxury teas directly from source gardens and boasts a collection of exclusive hand-crafted tea blends.

Dimitri says the company is also trying to promote the lifestyle attached to drinking tea. He demonstrates this by saying that should you step into this boutique-style set up in the middle of a shopping mall, one of the first things you'd be asked is if you want green, white or black tea. If you say black, then you need to choose between broken or unbroken (also called "whole leaf" tea).

From each of these, you then need to choose between blended and not blended. With not blended, you'll get something called "Single Estate" which means that tea leaves originate from one, specific tea estate or garden. Blended will include fruit or spices and teas from other estates.

With all the possible permutations and combinations to create a perfect blend, it's not surprising that TWG Tea now has a big selection of up to 800 types of fine harvest teas from around the world.

"Smell this," says Dimitri and thrusts a bowl of tea leaves at us.

"That's our Earl Grey tea. It's from Ceylon and has some citrus in it."

Insisting that it would be preferable to drink the tea without milk or sugar, he explains that the essential oil used to infuse the tea comes from Bergamot orange. This citrus fruit comes from southern Europe, which Dimitri is familiar with. Although his hometown is in northern Italy, he says that he's enjoyed his time here and loves it because he's a "summer person" and loves our tropical weather.

SPECIAL CUPPA

Among the white, yellow, green, blue oolong and mature tea, the one that is most eye-catching is "Yellow Gold Tea Buds". From a jar, Dimitri very carefully pours out a sample of tea leaves into a porcelain cup. Making sure the spoon is absolutely dry, he places it in the cup and separates the tealeaves.

"Can you see it? Can you see the gold in the leaves?" Sure enough, as he moves the tea leaves around in the cup, little specks of gold catch the light and glitter. Legend has it that this yellow tea was harvested for a Chinese emperor by virgins who wore silver gloves and cut each leaf using a pair of gold scissors.

All this care and attention Dimitri places on this special cup makes sense a moment later when the menu states that a pot will set you back more than RM400.

The Iced Tea Collection comes in 10 varieties of whole tea leaves carefully proportioned and packaged. They include TWG Tea classics like French Earl Grey, Eternal Summer Tea, Moroccan Mint Tea and Darjeeling. The quirkiest is probably its exclusive blend, Pink Flamingo Tea.

It is a blend of green tea with crimson hibiscus blossoms infusing into rose-coloured tea which exhibits

tart and fruity overtones.

For one litre of iced tea with a rich and intense flavour, Dimitri advises placing one tea bag into a teapot before adding half a litre of simmering water and letting it rest for five minutes. Then, remove the teabag and pour into two glasses filled to the brim with large ice cubes. Enjoy it as is or add sugar syrup for taste.

For a more subtle taste of the same tea, you need to repeat the process, but add one litre of room-temperature water into a glass pitcher. Refrigerate the tea for 12 hours. When it's ready to be served, just stir the tea and remove the teabag.

As we sip the brew from delicate fine bone china tea cups, Dimitri is correct that there is something delicate about the whole experience of drinking tea. Our palates cleansed, we leave the session duly refreshed and inspired for the tasks ahead.