



Rick Martin/John Batten Gallery

History in a Teacup

If you're searching for the elusive soul of Hong Kong, forget Starbucks in trendy Central and head to the Diamond Café in working-class Choi Hung. With its bleak, turquoise walls and wizened, inscrutable waiters, it's a place where you can study your racing sheet in peace, and partake of a peculiar fusion food that's developed in this crucible of East-West influences.

Two purveyors of this culture are the *cha chan teng* (tea cafés) and the *beng saat* (sorbet cafés). Here, you can enjoy a cup of Hong Kong's idiosyncratic *nai cha*, or milk tea, chomp on a *daan taat*, or egg tart, and risk a cup of *yen yeung*—half coffee, half tea.

Down in Sheung Wan, on western

Hong Kong island, the Hoi On Café has been baking buns and serving *yen yeung* for 52 years. Owner Wong Sing-lun, remembers when his café sat right on the harbour. Now there's a swath of reclaimed land in the way. Like any self-respecting tea café, the Hoi On has its own secret *nai cha* recipe. As Terence Ng, curator for the Hong Kong Food Culture exhibition at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, explains, it's as much a question of consistency as of taste. "Hong Kong people like a familiar environment. They want their *nai cha* to taste the same every time."

In the swirling eddy of globalization, as people search for rocks from the past to hold onto, Hong Kong citizens are

TEA TIME: The world of Hong Kong's *cha chan teng*, or tea cafés, as captured in a series of images by photographer Rick Martin

reaching for good old *nai cha*. A blend of cheap black teas served with sugar and evaporated milk, it evolved as a Hong Kong version of British milk tea, and was a favourite of labourers in need of an afternoon energy boost. Today, newspapers and magazines run sentimental features on *nai cha*, filled with details on cafés to visit in neighbourhoods where the well-heeled seldom tread.

The menu at the Diamond Café bears other evidence to leaner days in Hong Kong. For a taste, try *nai seui*, or "milk water," just milk and hot water with a teaspoon of sweet, evaporated milk. Or if you want something a little spicier, keep an eye out for hot lemon coke—heated Coca-Cola with slices of lemon and ginger. "Tastes almost like mulled wine," one upmarket visitor to a café told this reporter. "Most unusual."

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