



## THE GRAND RE-OPENING OF WISTERIA TEA HOUSE

Living up in the mountains where it is quiet and peaceful makes it easy to forget how difficult it can be for city-dwellers to find a bit of space to relax. As Wisteria re-opened after a year of renovation, we saw in the customers' faces—returning after a year away—the relief and joy of once again having a solace amidst all the bustle that is Taipei. Though Zhou Yu had maintained a small teahouse at another location, several tea lovers said it “wasn't the same” and that it was “great to be drinking tea at Wisteria again.” The serene setting, casual grace and also the charisma of its master, Zhou Yu, have made Wisteria one of the most important tea houses in the world, and a unique part of history and tea culture that any visitor to Taipei will find worthwhile.

Some thirty years ago, Zhou Yu was a teacher of experimental drama. His production company created and performed all kinds of plays that both expressed and criticized antique and modern culture. At that time, there was still a strong censorship board regulating all public performances in Taiwan, but Zhou laughingly recalls that “we never submitted our work.” Needless to say, the company was on the government's watch list. Even then, he was bold and focused, placing his devotion to art, as well as artistic freedom, above his personal livelihood or welfare.

Zhou Yu isn't sure how or when his passion for tea began, but remembers drinking and loving tea even as a child. As he found more and more depth in the art of tea, and fell in love with the culture, he wanted





Sometime in the 1970's Zhou Yu altered the house slightly so that it could also accommodate art shows, cultural activities and some tea sessions. As time went on, the tea began to overshadow other aspects of the house, and more and more people showed up as much for Zhou Yu's tea and tea knowledge as for the art or social discourse. The government at this time began its crackdown on the Democratic Party; and more and more the house became a solace for them and the one place where they could discuss their political ideas together, which of course only increased the owners' risk.

In the 1980's Zhou Yu converted the house into a tea house, calling it "Wisteria" for the first time. He used elements of nature to decorate the house with simple, wooden furniture, flowers and vines, tatami mats and simple artwork that all inspire calm. Very quickly, many artists, scholars, poets and mystics found the house a refuge; drinking tea in comfort and enjoying the company of other like-minded thinkers. In such a large, stressful city a quiet place to reflect, have a light meal and/or some fine tea is more than needed, then as now.

to devote his life to promoting tea and tea culture. But how? He didn't want to be a businessman, selling tea out of a shop. It went against his spiritual and artistic inclinations. The only other option, then, was to open a tea house; and his family home was the perfect location.

Before Wisteria was born, the house had been government housing, given to Zhou Yu's father for his service. In the 1950's, Zhou Yu's father converted part of the house into a meeting place for social and political discourse, gathering several of the city's greatest thinkers. Many of them were also in support of a democratic Taiwan. Like his son, Zhou Yu's father was liberal and consequently attracted the government's attention.

In the 1960's the house was severely damaged by a typhoon. Zhou Yu's father spent his own money to completely rebuild and renovate, using the opportunity to make the house even more suitable for public discourse and discussion, and the number of literati that came there regularly started to increase, as did the government's disdain.





At this time, the government had enough. They sought to close Wisteria down. It is actually very surprising that for so long, they only watched and didn't act. They claimed that since the house belonged to the government, as it was given to his father as government housing, they had the right to confiscate it. Fortunately, however, Nature once again had left its mark on Wisteria, since the damage caused by the typhoon complicated the court case. As mentioned above, Zhou Yu's father had completely rebuilt the house using his own money and the court had to recognize that the government's claim to ownership wasn't clear-cut. The trial dragged on with appeals for many years. The amazing thing is that during this time, the political climate in Taiwan was changing. More and more people were seeking a democratic reform. By the end of the trial, many of the scholars and dissidents that had believed so strongly in Taiwanese democracy were no longer delinquents, and the house where they met was no longer seen in a negative light. Amazingly, the court ruled that Wisteria, as it belonged to the govern-

ment, would become a national historic landmark; and that since it also had within it the private investment of Zhou Yu's family, it would forever be under Zhou Yu and his descendants' management. The tea house that the government had sued to close had become a historic site!

As time wore on, Wisteria became more and more important to Taipei citizens, for its art showings, relaxed atmosphere and great tea. The building, however, needed some structural repair, and Zhou Yu put it off for as long as he could before making the decision to close the tea house in 2007. He also decided to change the structure somewhat, opening up two rooms with glass windows that look out onto a huge, old tree. The change also means that the whole house is now connected in a circle, which – as Zhou Yu reminded us– “promotes the flow of Qi through the tea house”.

Beyond the ambience, Wisteria boasts one of the finest tea menus around. The problem with so many tea houses in Asia is that while they sometimes have an awesome setting—koi ponds, bamboo rail-



ings, tatami and all—they often just have the same list of over-priced, low quality teas. Being run by one of the most important tea masters in the world, lends the selection and preparation of tea at Wisteria a depth missing from other tea houses. Not only are the new-born Puerh teas all selected from old-growth trees by Zhou Yu himself, but Wisteria has a complete menu of vintage Puerh that includes selections from the Antique and Masterpiece Eras. There is even a note that says something to the effect that a customer can order any vintage of Puerh from Zhou Yu's personal collection just by asking the wait staff who then go ask him. Furthermore, there is also a large selection of organic oolongs, green teas, Wuyi Rock tea, and many others.

The water at Wisteria is brought down from a mountain spring to compliment the tea. One has the choice of using fine Yixing, a gaiwan, or even a Song Dynasty bowl to just put leaves and water in. All of the teaware is of better quality than at most tea houses. The spring water is all boiled in the kitchen and brought to the table in clay kettles that are kept warm with

oil-burners. There are no cheap imitation teapots or electric kettles in Wisteria. Zhou Yu says that would be “ruining my own tea.” The fact that so much care and experience are put into the menu of teas and selection of teaware, means that Wisteria is comfortable for the casual tea drinker as well as the connoisseur.

Zhou Yu says that he has become disheartened with much of the tea industry, especially Puerh. He says that the movement away from traditional agricultural methodology based on environmental balance and organic farming is destroying much of Yunnan, as it has already done to a large extent in Taiwan. He feels that when we support organic farming, we aren't just seeking tea that tastes better, selfishly satisfying ourselves, but also promoting a balanced environment which represents one aspect of the dialogue between Man and Nature that tea should inspire. For that reason, Zhou Yu says he will focus less and less on the production of new tea, using the reopening of Wisteria as an opportunity to begin concentrating more and more on the promotion of tea culture itself, rather than tea. He thinks that most all tea lovers will make correct choices if they are but taught how to evaluate organic teas themselves and the effects that lower-quality teas have on their physical and spiritual health.

Since its re-opening, Zhou Yu has already successfully held two tea gatherings in a series that he has so poetically called “Boundless Simplicity”. In both, he has attempted to capture some of the relaxed, free ambience of ancient tea gatherings because he feels that too many people have the notion that a tea ceremony must be something formal and serious. He also has used the opportunity to promote clean, healthy, organic teas and tea farmers in Taiwan and abroad, focusing on the differences these teas offer the drinker. The following is from the beautiful, partially handmade booklets that each participant was given:



## Introducing Wisteria's "Boundless Simplicity" Tea Gathering

Simplicity has been central to Han culture for more than two thousand years. There is a story in the *Cha Jing*, by Lu Yu, about an official named Lu Na who had planned a tea gathering. This was the first such gathering of tea lovers recorded, though there were other, earlier gatherings that escaped the brush of history. As such, Lu Na's tea gathering has remained a lasting model for tea lovers ever since. Our "Boundless Simplicity" ceremony will attempt to bring this art back to life, reviving the traditions of these ancients' tea gatherings, as well as their wisdom in tea and life.

## The Impetus of "Boundless Simplicity"

The space within an ink painting leaves room for the imagination.

The sound of silence brings peace,  
Just like an empty opera stage,  
With but a few symbols to suggest worlds to the audience.  
The ancients defined a fine tea gathering  
As a "simplicity that effortlessly leads to lasting harmony."  
The simplicity is lasting from the taste of the tea to the artistic inspiration that results.

The Qi of such harmony relaxes the body,  
Carrying one to the abode of the Immortals.  
The arrangement of teaware is so plain, yet evocative,  
The attention of the tea lovers present is naturally and calmly lead to the tea liquor.  
Eventually, the participants will feel unrestrained freedom,  
From perception to spirit,  
Which gradually opens the door to the universal Dao,  
Our history and future.



Zhou Yu has spent decades investing Wisteria with what he calls “spirit”; and it is evident the moment one crosses the threshold of the gate. Other tea houses have koi ponds, bamboo and wooden floors, but they often feel contrived, whereas even the newly-remodeled Wisteria has an antique, rustic feeling—as if it was cast together the way the Japanese tea huts were once made. The wonderfully arranged fresh flowers, the wooden floors and aged and weathered tatamis all whisper silent tales of so many stories: gatherings of love, sorrow and joy, business deals, artistic inspiration, friends reunited and even powerful meditation and contemplation. One could easily see the quiet tea monk lost in a pot of *Hong Yin*, and then imagine—a

few tables over—the genius poet finding his next inspiration in a cup of *yancha*. Past all the crowded joy of the first few weeks after reopening, things at Wisteria are settling back into that bit of garden tea from which we might pan out to the great and noisy city it is nestled so subtly within.

## *The Leaf*



