Hong Kong Milk Tea Culture: The Silk Stocking Craft

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Hong Kong milk tea culture, in summary:** Hong Kong milk tea is a cafe craft, not just tea with milk: strong boiled Ceylon-led blends, silk-stocking filtration, evaporated milk and the yuenyeung.

Hong Kong milk tea is a cafe institution and a point of local pride. It belongs with the world tea culture pages, right next to how customs differ.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in February 2026.

Hong Kong milk tea at a glance

Element	The note
Tea base	Strong Ceylon-led black blend, sometimes with Pu-erh fragments
Method	Boiled, not steeped; concentrated and tannic
"Silk stocking"	Muslin sock filters and aerates; smooths mouthfeel
Milk	Evaporated (Black & White brand is the best known); never fresh
Sugar	Usually added to taste; sweet but not syrupy
Yuenyeung	Coffee + tea, precise ratio; a Hong Kong invention
Where	Cha chaan teng (tea cafes), all-day institutions
Heritage	Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong

Why it is genuinely different: the silk stocking

Hong Kong milk tea is not just "tea with milk" relocated to Asia, it is a distinct craft, and the techniques are what make the cup. The brew is a deliberately strong blend of black teas, typically Ceylon, sometimes with Assam and a little Pu-erh, boiled rather than simply steeped, producing a concentrated, malty, deeply tannic liquor unlike the gentle hot-water Western pour. It is then strained repeatedly through a long muslin sock, the "silk stocking" (si wa), which filters the leaf completely and aerates the brew, giving the famously smooth, slightly creamy mouthfeel that defines the drink. Finally evaporated milk goes in, never fresh dairy, because it carries more body and a caramelised sweetness fresh milk lacks. The name is for a craft, not a recipe, and a cup made at home with a teabag and fresh milk is a polite imitation rather than the article.

The cha chaan teng, and why it anchors a city

Hong Kong milk tea makes most sense in its home, the cha chaan teng, the all-day tea-cafe that emerged in the post-war 1950s as an affordable, Westernised counterpart to the old Chinese tea houses. It serves a particular fusion menu, macaroni soup, French toast, Hong Kong scrambled eggs, pineapple buns, satay beef on rice, and the milk tea is the default drink across all of it, the affordable place generations went to eat, gossip and rest across long shifts. That social weight is why the making technique was inscribed on Hong Kong's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017, the technique itself rather than just the recipe, and why locals can pick a real Hong Kong milk tea against a Western imitation with quiet certainty, see how customs differ.

Evaporated milk, and the yuenyeung

The piece most Western recipes get wrong is the milk: the drink is built around evaporated milk specifically, not condensed and not fresh. Evaporated milk is unsweetened milk concentrated by gentle evaporation, carrying body and a slight caramelised note without the heavy sugar of condensed milk, which would oversweeten the cup; sugar is then added to taste in the glass rather than premixed, keeping the balance under each drinker's control. Black & White is the cafe-standard brand, and the loyalty is not just nostalgia, a generic evaporated milk does make a slightly different cup. The same craft underlies the yuenyeung (literally mandarin ducks), coffee blended into milk tea in a set ratio, a Hong Kong original that tastes like neither parent: the coffee anchors the tea body, the tea tannins lengthen the coffee finish. The wider cha chaan teng family runs to lemon tea and iced milk tea, small variations on the same vocabulary.

A home version, and its limits

Far from a cha chaan teng, a passable home version is doable, accepting that the silk-stocking smoothness is the part you cannot fully replicate without the sock and the practised hand. Use a strong Ceylon-led blend (or a strong English Breakfast), brew several teaspoons of leaf in just-boiled water for four to five minutes then briefly bring to a near-simmer, strain repeatedly between two jugs (the "pulling" motion does a fraction of what the stocking does), and finish with a tablespoon or two of evaporated milk per cup and sugar to taste. The result is recognisably Hong Kong style, richer and more tannic than a British cup, and a fair taste of what the drink is about, though the cafe version is a step further on, so drink it where it lives when you can.

What to buy

Source a strong Ceylon-led base from the black tea range or the Ceylon range, or browse the full tea shop; free UK delivery over £35.

Tea-culture reading

- How customs differ
- Black tea
- American tea culture

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The cost of a single cup is the only price worth comparing. Loose leaf mostly comes out ahead, though some supermarket bags keep up.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/