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## TIME OUT - BUBBLE TEA

# Love for tea is bubbling up

*Tapioca balls are the secret to this fun confection*

By Tom Horgen, Staff Writer

You've heard the name and probably seen it in Uptown or on the menu at one of the Twin Cities' many Asian restaurants. But what is this funny-looking drink? Why do people talk about it so religiously? And - whoa - what are those black blobs at the bottom?

The colorful drink, with its many flavors and chewy black tapioca balls - which you suck up in a giant straw - is simply a fun, tasty treat. For enthusiasts, though, it's a social ritual. An outing with friends. An experience.

Blasting out of Taiwan in the 1980s, bubble tea swept through eastern Asia before hitting California in the mid-1990s and the Midwest a few years ago. Once a phenomenon only in Asian communities, the drink is breaking out. "When I first opened I was scared I would only reach Asian customers," said Nhi Tran, who owns Bubble Delite in Minneapolis. "But a lot of Americans like it, too. They're crazy for the tapioca!"

**The Experience** Choosing the right bubble tea is as complicated as choosing a good wine. At specialty shops, such as Bubble Delite or the Tea Garden (where a DJ spins electronic music on weekends), there are hundreds of flavors, which can be served warm or cold. And then there's that giant straw. Which color will you pick today? Of course, the main attraction for most drinkers is the tapioca pearls that rest at the bottom of the drink. Sucking up these chewy, marble-sized treats can be jolting at first, but they soon become a soothing party in your mouth. Sip, chew, sip, chew. Splendid. Once hooked, introducing the drink to friends almost becomes a rite of passage in the bubble tea experience - just so you can see the look on their faces when that first pearl comes shooting through the straw.

**The Bubbles** So what are the bubbles? Good question. Nowadays, most people think of the tapioca balls as the bubbles. Originally, it referred to air bubbles that formed at the top of the drink when the tea was shaken. Over time, people came to call the pearls the bubbles, as in "Do you want bubbles with that?" The tapioca pearls, also called boba, aren't like the tiny white tapioca jellies you find in pudding, though. These large, dark tapioca balls need to be cooked fresh every day. Besides the tea-based drinks and fruity smoothies, other drinks are getting the bubble treatment at such specialty shops as the Tea Garden and Bubble Delite. "We'll put them in anything," said Tea Garden co-owner Nick Nguyen.



*SOME FUNKY FLAVORS - Coconut mung bean - Kumquat - Taro - Avocado - Lychee - Sweet plum - Mocha frappe - French vanilla - Cantaloupe - Yogurt*

***The Health Factor*** Is bubble tea good for you? Sort of. And sort of not. Yes, the tea drinks at a place like The Tea Garden are made from fresh fruit, fruit concentrates, and loose-leaf teas from Taiwan. The smoothies at other restaurants, on the other hand, can be made from a variety of ingredients - powder extracts, syrup, milk, sugar, ice - depending on the place. The tapioca pearls are made from brown sugar and cassava-root starch.

***Quality is Key*** Like wine, the contents of your bubble tea and the process in which it's made greatly affect the quality. Smaller bubble tea sellers often just whip up the drink from powder, milk and ice. Both the Tea Garden and Bubble Delite use more ingredients, such as fresh fruit, coffee and chai tea - and keep their tapioca fresh; they are made every 4 hours. Tea Garden co-owner Diana Nguyen said there's no fooling around when crafting this drink.

"Making bubble tea is an art," she said.

#### WHERE TO FIND BUBBLE TEA

The Tea Garden - A zillion possible combinations of flavors and varieties  
2601 Hennepin Av. S., Mpls., 612-377-1700  
1692 Grand Av., St. Paul, 651-690-3495

Bubble Delite - More than 100 flavors  
2515 Nicollet Av. S., Mpls., 612-872-2322

Freshens - 12 flavors  
120 S. 6th St., Mpls., 612-338-8066

Quang Restaurant - Six flavors  
2719 Nicollet Av., Mpls., 612-870-4739

Bravo! Cafe & Bakery - Eight flavors  
1106 Grand Av., St. Paul, 651-287-9117

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