

Bubble tea is the latest trend

Forget about BlackBerry handhelds, starter marriages and Dr. Phil. Today's hottest trend is bubble tea.

For those whose return address is not the cutting edge, bubble tea is a Taiwanese specialty tea concoction. Colorful, sweet and refreshing, it combines black or green tea with fresh fruit juices or pulp-loaded fruit concentrates.

The mixture is shaken over ice, cocktail-style, strained into a glass and then given a three-dimensional garnish: tapioca pearls, the chewy, marble-size Gummi Bear-like treats that are the bane of orthodontists worldwide. Other ingredients — milk, soy or lychee, to name a few — also can make an appearance in the frothy libation.

Bubble tea is the biggest thing to come along in the beverage industry since Starbucks took a swipe at world domination. Whole cities have fallen to the bubble tea revolution; walk through certain Los Angeles neighborhoods, for example, and it seems as if bubble tea is being hawked at every corner — even in Chinatown in Vancouver, British Columbia.

As with most trends, this one has finally landed in flyover country. The **Tea Garden** (2601 Hennepin Av. S., Minneapolis, 612-377-1700), the Twin Cities' first bubble tea counter, opened in March, and business has been booming ever since. The place is really a scene, particularly on Friday and Saturday evenings, when DJs spin records and the line of thirsty bubble tea fanatics snakes out the door.

Owners Diana, Nick and Christina Nguyen offer several dozen bubblicious flavors, including honeydew, guava, tangerine, grapefruit, kumquat and star fruit.

Beware the pretenders to the bubble tea throne. Christina Nguyen said that a major red flag is when the mixologist tries to pawn off a concoction of water and powder as freshly brewed tea.

"I guess you could call that instant bubble tea," she laughed, her disapproving tone ringing through the word *instant*. "You might as well add pearls to a can of Brisk."

And smart bubble tea drinkers demand fresh pearls. The Nguyens buy pre-rolled pearl tapioca (the pellets, made from the root of the cassava plant, are a principal pudding ingredient), cook them in small batches throughout the day, and then spoon them into glasses of icy, foamy tea. Swirling in the bottom of the glass and slurped through extra-fat straws, they're as perky as Reese Witherspoon in "Legally Blonde."

And they definitely put the bubble in bubble tea.

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