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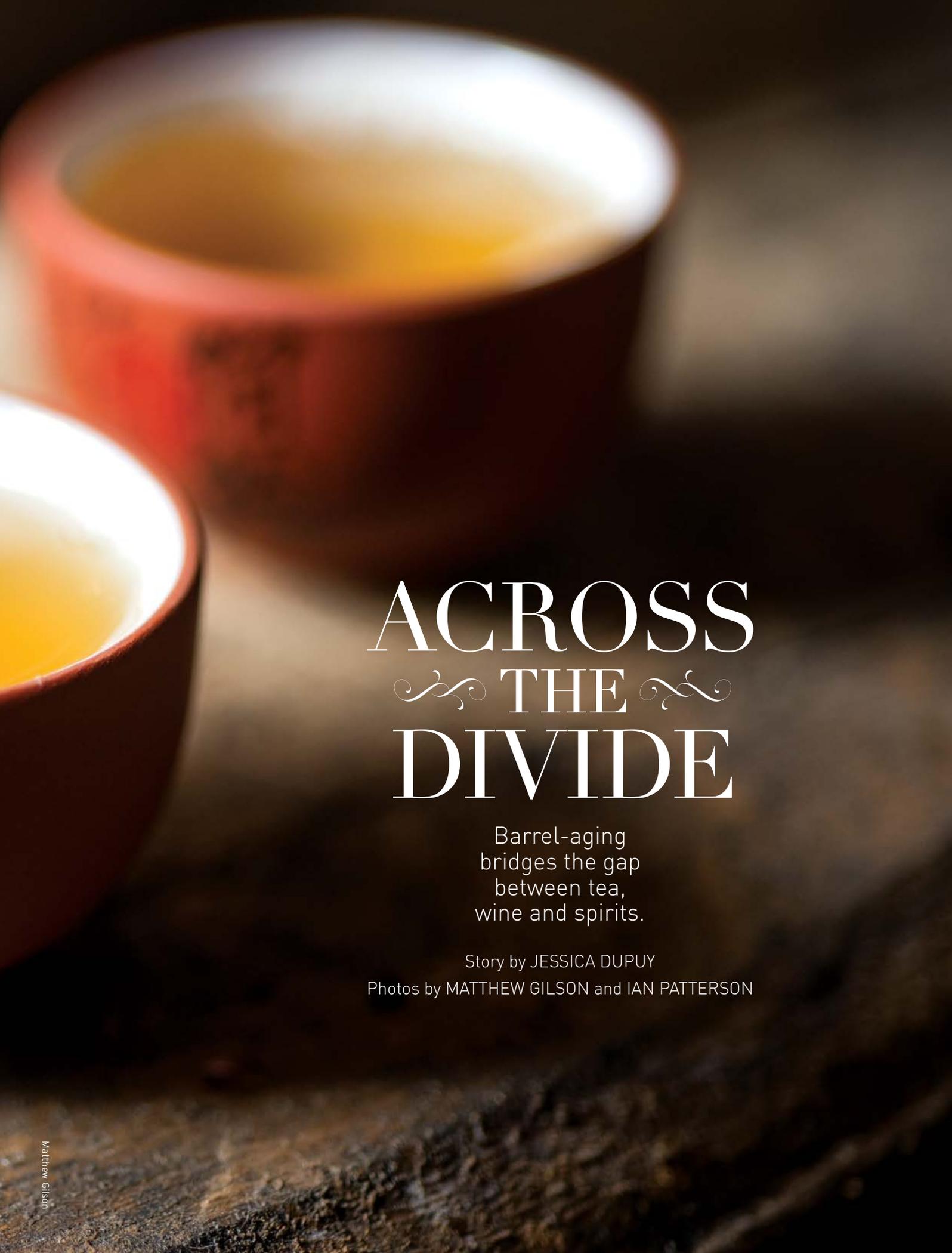
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2015  
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A barrel-aged Lapsang souchong tea at Rare Tea Cellar in Chicago.



# ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Barrel-aging  
bridges the gap  
between tea,  
wine and spirits.

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**O**n a quiet neighborhood street in Portland, Oregon, sits a rustic, reclaimed brick building shrouded by foliage. Inside is the heart of the Steven Smith Teamaker operation—there’s a retail space offering an assortment of teas, along with a window for viewing the tea production, and there’s a tea bar pouring oolongs, pu-erhs, chai and herbal teas. Regulars often stop in for a tin or two to take home, sometimes lingering over a pot, and newcomers often pause to taste through a guided flight of teas.

During the holidays, the shop is especially busy, in part because of the much-anticipated annual release of teas aged in barrels that once held whiskey, rum and Pinot Noir. “It all started with whiskey barrels,” says Tony Tellin, the company’s master tea blender and senior vice president (Steven Smith, the company’s founder and namesake, died earlier this year). In 2009, Tellin put some tea in a whiskey barrel given to him by Oregon-based Rogue Brewery. “Those guys are amazing in that they will try anything, and are open to any new ideas,” Tellin says. “Two days after I asked them what they thought about trying this idea, I had two whiskey barrels at my door.”

Tapping the flavorful power of a reutilized oak barrel offers the opportunity to elevate a tea from excellent to sublime. In its purest form, tea is a collection of leaves from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, mildly processed and dried for steeping in hot water and drinking. But tea is also a blank canvas—delicate in nature, tea has the ability to easily absorb aromatic and flavor influences over time. Darjeeling, oolong, Lapsang souchong, dragonwell green and silver-needle white teas have all been transformed through the use of dried fruits, herbs and even smoke to impart different flavor characteristics. But in recent years, a handful of teamakers have been marrying the time-honored tradition of barrel-aging wines and spirits with the impressionable delicacies of tea. “It’s not a stretch to see this happening with tea—it’s not too dissimilar to the ancient Chinese method of fermenting and aging pu-erh tea,” says Jonathan Sims, owner of the Austin-based Tea Embassy. “I like seeing people push the creative boundaries of what you can do with it. The story of tea making its way over centuries from a ceremonial drink in China and Japan to a commonly consumed beverage in America is part of what makes its appeal so great.”

## TRUE TO TRADITION

Oak barrels have been used for centuries to impart definitive flavor aspects to whiskey, rum, sherry, brandy and wine. Through a mysterious combination of organic chemistry and the unpredictable alchemy of time, oak vessels add a new set of descriptors to these wines and spirits, ranging from nutty and toasty to creamy and candied, with qualities of vanilla and baking spices. But could the elements that oak impart on bourbon or brandy translate to similar characteristics in tea?

It’s a question that led Toronto-based Josh Caplan to leap into tea production in 2014 with the launch of his company Tea of the People. “There’s something about the ceremonial process of tea that is intriguing to me,” Caplan says. “Tea is so significant because it links people and places of the past, present and future. Tea is one of the primary linkages between ancient Eastern civilization and the contemporary Western world.”

Methodical and analytical in his approach, Caplan didn’t leap before looking deeply into the history and method of producing tea and drawing from those traditions to prepare teas with authenticity. For the company’s line of green teas, for example, he sources hand-picked Dragonwell green tea because of its significance in Chinese history, as it was once solely consumed by Chinese emperors.

In his research, Caplan was intrigued by the thought of aging teas to add another layer of flavor. “Our goal is to build on traditions with subtle hints of innovation to take the story of tea to another level,” Caplan says. “Aging tea in oak barrels seemed like a perfect solution.”

Caplan admits he didn’t know anything about barrel aging at first. In 2013, he began speaking with wine and spirits experts and started a trial-and-error process using different types of barrels—both wet and dry—and assessing aging factors like humidity and temperature, as well as testing how teas developed over different periods of time. After about a year, he settled on a process that utilizes new, dry, French oak barrels at a specific toast level for an aging period spanning three to five months, and launched Tea of the People with two barrel-aged teas and a line of quality green and black teas. “We started with a blend that could be enjoyed without the barrel, and then used [the barrel] as a flavoring agent to add complementary nuances that weren’t overpowering,” Caplan says.

Caplan’s barrel-aged Madagascar Cocoa X Mint Rooibos is made with an organic, single-estate rooibos tea that is aged in a barrel along with roasted Madagascar cocoa beans, and finished with Moroccan mint leaves, resulting in a soothing, almost creamy tea. Tea of the People’s barrel-aged Silk Road chai takes the flavors in a different direction; the blend is made with Indian Assam tea for its body and strong malty flavor, and Chinese Imperial Keemun for its lighter, stone-fruit and orchid-like characteristics. The mixture is then barrel-aged with





Josh Caplan of Tea of the People in Toronto. Above: Tea of the People's barrel-aged Silk Road Chai.





Rodrick Markus in his office at Rare Tea Cellar. Bottom: Tea leaves heading into a rum barrel at Rare Tea Cellar.



whole Sichuan peppercorns, resulting in a vibrant tea with lingering nutty, sweet and spicy undertones. “We called the blend ‘Silk Road,’ denoting the ancient trade route between China and India,” Caplan says. “We wanted to bring these two time-honored ingredients together, and marry them in a special way.”

## AGING EXPERIENCE

With his launch of Tea of the People, Caplan became one of the newest tea blenders to tap the power of barrel-aging. In Chicago, Rare Tea Cellar founder Rodrick Markus has spent the past 22 years traveling the world to uncover the mysteries of tea. Along the way, he’s discovered a number of ways to blend teas and flavoring agents, and he’s been barrel-aging teas for about 10 years. “In my travels, I’d see massive rooms of fresh flowers and tea to bring in new flavor,” Markus says. “I started to notice aged and vintage varieties of teas, and I thought if tea is really a sponge to absorb aromas, that oak barrels could certainly impart some interesting flavors.”

Markus’ first experiments involved aging Keemun teas in bourbon barrels, but he has since tinkered with aging teas in barrels that previously held sherry, Cognac or different varieties of rum for anywhere from six months to two years. “At first it was a process of trial and error, using wet barrels with enough spirit in them to saturate the inside,” he says. “We’d fill them about three-quarters full with tea, and let it absorb anything and everything from the barrel!”

Over time, Markus started trying different methods of utilizing the barrel’s influence. “We use a unique method of spinning the barrels to make sure all tea leaves are getting in contact with the aromatics. Over the years, we’ve reached more of a mastery of which teas would do the best, and in which barrels.”

Markus has found that rooibos absorbs barrel aspects particularly well, offering a pleasant scent of amaretto-style sweetness when aged in bourbon and rum barrels. He’s also found success by blending the floral aromas of Darjeeling tea with the spicy notes found in rye whiskey barrels. Recently, he has aged single-estate Keemun tea and lime in tequila barrels; a mix of high mountain black teas in a rye whiskey barrel to use in a special chai blend; and not long ago he acquired a barrel long utilized in aging rich and fragrant Demerara rum, which he’ll use with another tea blend he’s been developing.

Once the teas have aged, Markus often reuses the barrels for other projects, but he’s also worked with brewers and distillers to place the tea-laced barrels back into use for aging beer or spirits. The barrels are even crossing a culinary divide, as Markus provides used barrels to chefs, who use the wood for grilling or smoking.

## PORTLAND PERSPECTIVE

Tony Tellin may have first turned to whiskey barrels for his tea-aging projects at Steven Smith Teamaker, but this was just the start. The company—founded by Smith, whose

previous ventures included Stash Tea and Tazo Tea—typically works with full-leaf varieties, blends, botanicals, herbs and tinctures. But in the deeply traditional world of tea, the company has also embraced innovation (they also serve tea on tap, including a nitro-enhanced tea), and the idea of barrel aging felt like a natural progression.

In an effort to reflect the local flavor in Oregon, Tellin worked with Willamette Valley winemaker Adelsheim Vineyard to age a blend of tea in Pinot Noir barrels. The influence was subtle—did the tea taste like Pinot Noir? Not exactly—but you could detect hints of nuttiness from the oak, and touches of fruit from the wine that the barrel had previously held. Key to the process, Tellin says, is approaching barrel-aging with care. “We wanted to be really careful with how we integrated tea and barrels, as we want the finished product to reflect the tea’s original character as well as the barrel it was aged in,” Tellin says. “We don’t want the delicate character to be overwhelmed.”

Barrel-aged tea isn’t at the forefront of Smith’s production, but it has become a regular project for release during the winter holidays. No annual release is the same, and most of the teas are aged for about six months. Past projects have included the Pinot Noir tea, a white tea aged in rum barrels, and an Assam second-flush tea that spent time in used bourbon barrels. The 2015 project, which will be released in November, includes three new tea flavors—one of which is an herbal Moringa leaf blended with vanilla bean, orange peel, licorice and sarsaparilla root, and stored in an Irish whiskey barrel.

Tellin’s barrel-aged teas often sell out within a few weeks, and similar projects from Rare Tea Cellar and Tea of the People are similarly in high demand, suggesting that these producers may be onto something special. “These are creative attempts to differentiate the teas in the market and find something that is popularly appealing, just as you see oak aging as a function of a winemaker’s choice to create certain styles of wine,” says James Tidwell, a Dallas-based master sommelier and certified tea specialist.

Tidwell says oak can add complexity to a tea, enhancing the overall effect, but urges caution on the part of teamakers to keep from going overboard. “Authenticity is key if [you want] tea enthusiasts to take it seriously,” Tidwell says. “Just as you would expect a good jasmine tea to have actual jasmine flowers in it, the use of oak to age teas should be done with a deft hand. You don’t want it to be overpowering.”

For now, the teamakers tapping barrels seem to be using due care, and their efforts are demonstrating tea’s true versatility. “I don’t think any of us are doing this to be the pioneers of a new trend. It’s important, but it doesn’t define us,” Caplan says.

In the case of Rare Tea Cellar, which makes more than 900 teas, the small portfolio of barrel-aged releases are more of an artful addition to the existing lineup. “Connecting the dots between the spirits world and the tea world is a really inspiring concept, and brings a unique way for people to appreciate both sides of the spectrum,” Markus says. “When it comes to tea, the sky is the limit.” ■

