



TAIWAN

THE BEAUTY IS IN THE DETAILS

Three women polish a huge incense holder that sits before a statue of Guanyin, Buddhist goddess of mercy, in Taipei's Longshan Temple. The bronze censer gleams in the early light, and still they polish, on hands and knees. Intricate bronze dragons twine around columns, guarding altars where the faithful have placed fresh flowers and fruit.

I've just arrived in Taiwan, but this first impression whispers a truth that will be echoed everywhere I go. When you pause to seek out the subtleties here, the little details, you enter into a vibrant, complex culture that draws from Chinese, Japanese, and even Polynesian roots. You discover people who take tremendous pride in craftsmanship and traditions that enrich life. →





LEFT TO RIGHT: SWORDMAKER KUO CHANG-HSI FORGES IRON AND STEEL; WAN HUA HERB MARKET, TAIPEI; RICE FIELDS IN SOUTHERN TAIWAN; BICYCLISTS IN LONGTAN; LUKANG LANTERN MAKER WU DUEN-HOW; A TAROKO WEAVER; TEA SERVICE AT THE LUYE TEA HOUSE. PREVIOUS PAGE: LONGSHAN TEMPLE IN LUKANG.



Whether it is Taipei's most revered temple or its tallest modern building, thoughtfulness and skill are evident in abundance. Taipei 101 is more than just another mega skyscraper. Study it and you'll see that the world's second-highest structure was designed to resemble a stylized stalk of bamboo, growing straight into the clouds.

I begin to believe that everything here is more than it first appears. Even tea is not simply tea.

As I wander through Taipei's old Wan Hua district, I'm drawn inside a shop with no sign. When I enter the cool, dark interior, I'm welcomed with a challenge. "If you want a Michelin restaurant, you've come to the wrong place," says the owner, Mr. Ho. "But if you want the purity of the tea, you are in the right place. What is your purpose?"

I glance around at his shelves displaying pots, cups, and graceful bamboo tea implements. I savor the harmony and calm. "The purity of the tea," I reply, not really knowing what I mean. "I seek the purity of the tea."

My answer must suffice, because the Taiwanese oolong he serves me is the best tea I've ever tasted.

"We enjoy the tea for its color, its smell," says the master as he pours the first pot of tea into a cup,

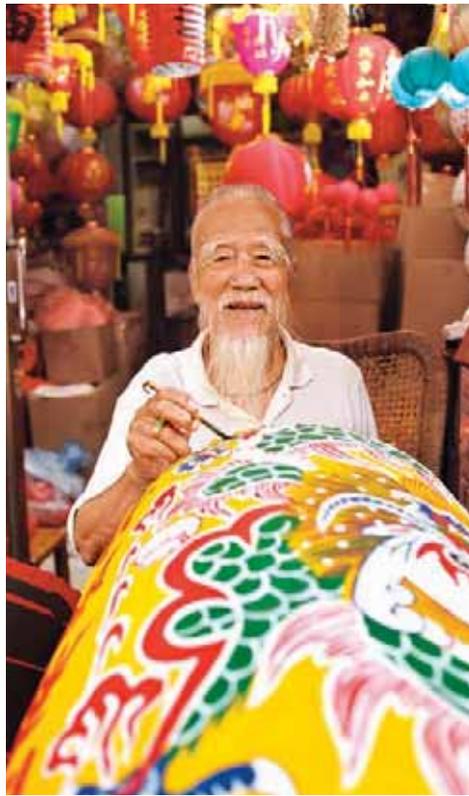
inspects it, and then discards it. He holds the warm, empty cup to my nose so I can sense the aroma. "First we have to check the color, the brightness, the smell—then drink. Eye, nose, mouth."

Each time he adds boiling water to the tiny teapot, new, complex, slightly different flavors unfurl from the leaves. I would learn later on my trip about the complicated process of picking, drying, and fermenting that gives Taiwanese tea its complex taste, and talk to a great-grandmother who revealed that the best tea comes from the very tips of the branch, and then only from branches with twin leaves at the end of their stems.

For now, I'm content to relax and sip. As I roll the warm liquid across my tongue, the master brews tea into a metaphor. "When the guest comes into this space, I treat them like a family member entering my house: politely and with respect," Mr. Ho says. "All are treated the same, rich or poor, familiar or unfamiliar. We're all drinking the same tea."

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A two-hour train ride from Taipei, Taroko National Park attracts visitors with wooded mountains and a spectacular gorge etched in striated marble cliffs. It's a shock to discover such natural beauty so close to a city of nearly 3 million people. In fact, Taiwan's "Wild



“EVERYTHING HERE IS MORE THAN IT FIRST APPEARS.”

East” is home to many of the country’s 200 peaks that top 9,800 feet. But beyond scenery, Taroko offers other rewards—the chance to meet some of Taiwan’s aboriginal peoples.

The local Taroko tribe’s language is similar to that spoken on Easter Island, half a world away. Aborigines are descended from itinerant, ancient Polynesians. Until a generation ago, some still wore facial tattoos. There are 14 recognized aboriginal tribes in Taiwan. Today visitors can learn about their heritage at cultural centers scattered throughout the country.

I talk with Ciwang Huyu, an aboriginal teacher and weaving expert, who explains the deeper meanings behind the traditional fabric that Taroko women weave. As I listen to Ciwang, what appears to be an abstract diamond pattern on a swath of cloth transforms itself into the “eyes of the ancestors.” A ladderlike border becomes the legend of the “Rainbow Bridge,” which everyone passes over to reach the afterlife—unless they are bad. “Then the bridge breaks,” Huyu cautions, “and they fall into a valley and are devoured by giant river crabs.”

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A master craftsman is at work in the market at Cheding, a small town on Taiwan’s southwest coast.

Kuo Chang-hsi, who created the blade for director Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is perhaps Taiwan’s most famous sword maker.

Kuo heats layers of iron and steel, then pounds them into shape, moving back and forth between his 2,730° F furnace and his anvil, where he sends sparks flying.

When he takes a break to sip some cool water, I ask how long he has been practicing his craft. “Since I was 13,” he tells me. “I am the third generation.” He makes more than 100 different types of knives and swords. The most intricately decorated models take as many as five years to complete, their hilts and scabbards detailed with symbols and images from Chinese legends.

He ducks into the back room of his shop to fetch several of his most prized works. I’m intrigued by the beautiful patterns that play across the blades. In the forging process, Kuo folds and hammers raw iron as many as 500 times to make it denser, then adds an inner layer of steel and continues to work the metal. The resulting layers form different types of subtle, shaded designs, including “wind,” “rain,” and “clouds.” They also make the blade remarkably resilient and flexible. Kuo presses the sword’s tip into the concrete floor and leans on it until it bows so far I’m sure it will snap. But the blade springs back to perfection.



**“WE REALLY BELIEVE
THAT FOOD IS
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For good measure, he picks up a kitchen knife and chops a half-inch steel cable neatly in two, then shows me the blade. Not even a nick. I buy one of his knives, hoping a bit of the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* spirit will guide my hand in the kitchen.

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An hour away, at the southwestern port city of Kaohsiung, I see culinary artistry on display at the renowned night market. Open as late as 2 a.m., night markets are a favorite place for Taiwanese to shop, eat, and play once the sun has faded. It's 9 o'clock here on Liouhe Road, and hundreds of vendors are whipping up street-food specialties like oyster omelets, fried octopus tentacles, shaved ice, and the infamous stinky tofu—blocks of foul-smelling fermented bean curd that actually don't taste so bad once they're fried and topped with pickled cabbage.

Although this isn't elegant cuisine, it's an opportunity to mingle with locals and watch specialists at work, as they prep and cook dishes on grills, in huge woks, or in stacks of bamboo steamers.

In the southern town of Tainan, at Du Hsiao Yueh restaurant, I learn how one family turned street food into high art, by focusing on making a humble noodle soup the best it could possibly be. More than 100 years

ago, Hung Kwei Toan's great-grandfather started serving tan tsai noodles from a portable kitchen he carried in baskets slung from a pole over his shoulder.

Hung tells me that the secret to their soup—now sold at several indoor locations but still assembled in front of customers—is not exotic ingredients but “putting the five flavors in harmony.” It takes three years of training to perfect the technique of making a deceptively simple-looking bowl of noodles in shrimp broth, topped with pork sauce, cilantro, and ground garlic.

“We cook the pork sauce for five hours, stirring it evenly and continually in a special way,” Hung says, “If a customer tastes our noodles, they won't go anywhere else. I'm confident of that.”

Shelves next to the table where I'm sitting display well-worn old noodle bowls and ladles. “Your great-grandfather's, I ask?” Hung nods. “I cherish all the things I have from the four generations.”

By now, I'm eager to try crafting Taiwanese food myself. That takes me to Jodie Tsao's home in Taipei, where she teaches me to make raised dumplings and scallion pancakes. I soon discover that even food isn't just food in Taiwan.

As Jodie goes over the various ingredients we'll use for the fillings, she explains the benefits of each one: the



LEFT TO RIGHT: DU HSIAO YUEH NOODLE SHOP IN TAINAN; SWEET BUNS FROM DIN TAI FUNG DUMPLING HOUSE; SHI YANG CULTURE RESTAURANT, TAIPEI; KAOHSIUNG NIGHT MARKET; A STEAMER OF PORK BUNS; AN OYSTER OMELET AT KAOHSIUNG NIGHT MARKET.

gelatin in wood ears is good for joints; pumpkin has vitamin B; root vegetables are an earth element, good for your bones; cabbage protects the stomach.

“We really believe that food is our medicine,” she tells me. “It’s a big part of the culture here.”

We sit at her dining room table, kneading, rolling, and filling dumplings—a savory mixed-vegetable version and a sweet version with black sugar and ground sesame. It’s not easy. I practice on dumpling after dumpling, cupping the dough, then pleating and stretching it around the filling.

After the dumplings have risen one last time, Tsao steams them and we sit down to enjoy our fat, fluffy creations. **As I bite into the hot bundle, I feel like I’ve become a Taiwanese artisan myself, if only for an afternoon.**

It’s clear—in everything from the dazzling, polished surface of a temple incense burner to the immaculate streets in every city I visited—that the Taiwanese take great pride in beauty and harmony.

But when you pause to talk, to ask questions, to learn the stories behind a piece of cloth, a cup of tea, or a bowl of noodles, you enter deep into the culture. You discover the richness. You learn that everything is more than it seems. —Gayle Herman

Photographs by Maynard Switzer



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