PROFILE

Marin tea guru in the fight of a lifetime

Photos by Nicole Boliaux / The Chronicle

By Jonathan Kauffman

David Lee Hoffman will not show me his tea cave.

The Lagunitas cave where Hoffman, owner of the Phoenix Collection, is aging tens of thousands of pounds of tea is well-known in the industry. "All in This Tea," Les Blank's 2007 documentary about Hoffman, pictures him loading boxes into it. Marin County, which has been suing Hoffman for more than a decade to bring his 2-acre estate to code, has listed the cave in its extensive complaints.

Yet Hoffman still treats it as a secret. "It's not open to the public," he tells me.

That may be because most of the teas stored at the Last Resort, his home and "ecological research center" in the Lagunitas hills, are puers, a genre of Chinese tea equivalent to cult Cabs or single-malt scotches. Hoffman is one of the most storied tea vendors in the United States, and his puers may be worth millions of dollars, albeit to a minuscule cadre of collectors.

As the Phoenix Collection spends down the tea Hoffman has accrued, these serious collectors have found their way to him. Sales, he says, are growing, as is Hoffman's sense of urgency. Lyme disease, a recent diagnosis, has inflamed the 73-year-old's joints and sapped his energy. At the same time, Marin County is fed up with Hoffman, who has built 36 structures on his property over the course of 45 years without county permits. Since 2015, the property has been under court-appointed receivership.

At some point, the tea party will end. Hoffman doesn't know whether he'll emerge with any money, a home or tea.

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It takes determination — which, in the Internet age, means a phone call — to learn that the Phoenix Collection actually has an office in a strip mall down the hill from the Last Resort, and that it is open to the public on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

When I visit, then, the hubbub inside comes as a surprise. Six of the carved stools around the tea station have tiny white cups set before them. Two women in their 60s sip from theirs admiringly, watching their partners saw through a 6-foot-long cylinder wrapped in palm leaves and stuffed with Hunanese hua juan tea. A young woman in a peasant dress stops by to give Hoffman vinegar she has made from his apples. Another couple peruse a display of puer tea cakes on display in the shop's Tea Museum, murmuring over the rounds, the bricks, even a wizened pomelo stuffed with fermented leaves.

Dressed in a blue shirt with Central American embroidery and his customary pageboy cap, Hoffman beams genially at the bustle, calling customers back to their cups each time his assistant, Nawang Tsomo, pours a new round. Part instructor, part host, he regularly darts outside to reposition a silvery solar cooker in the parking lot, returning with warm whole-wheat breads baked inside.

To find so many people interested in tasting esoteric teas is due in part to Hoffman's proselytizing. When he started Silk Road Teas, his first tea company, 25 years ago, puer (sometimes spelled pu'erh, and pronounced POO-air) was even more rare in the United States than it is today.

Puer comes from Yunnan province in southwest China. In the 14th century, cosmopolitan tea culture in China began brewing loose-leaf tea, but remote Yunnan continued to press tea into cakes for easy transport.. By the 1970s, the tea was almost a curiosity, prized mainly by Yunnanese locals, Tibetans and Cantonese. The latter discovered that as the cakes traveled to southeast China's sticky, sweltering climate and lingered in storerooms, their flavor became deep and robust, the ideal complement to dim sum and rich stews.

According to Jinghong Zhang, author of "Puer Tea: Ancient Caravans and Urban Chic," in 1973 one tea factory, recognizing Cantonese appetites for these earthy older teas, developed a method for fermenting tea leaves to replicate many of the effects of aging. Since then, puer has been divided into two classes, the artificially fermented or "cooked" (shu) and the "raw" (sheng).

Cooked puer, which brews up almost as dark and opaque as cocoa, can smell like wet leaves or moist humus, with a fruity sweetness and a viscous, satiny body.

Young raw puer resembles green tea, orchids and honeyed stone fruits floating over base notes of hay and toast, with a bitterness that nips the tongue. When it ages naturally, the leaves oxidize and microbial residents get to work.

As the 10-year mark approaches, the aromas of dried tobacco, camphor, dried fruit and incense overcome the flowers and vegetal notes. Every year adds to the tea's smoothness and depth. The best puer can linger in the throat and flush the chest and forehead, occasionally to a psychotropic degree.

It is almost impossible to fall in love with aged puer without wanting to collect it.

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In 1972, a 28-year-old Hoffman returned to the United States after almost a decade abroad, with the seed of his vast collection in his backpack: a mushroom-shaped cake of puer.

A former engineering student at San Jose State and son of a successful wallpaper manufacturer in Oakland, Hoffman had left the country just after Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. On his destination-less pilgrimage, he traveled to more than 100 countries, staying the longest in Nepal, Afghanistan and India, where he lived in Tibetan refugee settlements and fell in love with tea. "Most of the world are tea drinkers," he recounts. Each time he says "tea," his voice rises and falls, resonating like a chime.

He returned to the States to recuperate, wasted away after successive bouts of hepatitis and paratyphoid fever. Accompanying him home, too, was a sense of mission. Traveling, "I felt like I was just a sponge soaking everything up," Hoffman says. "I came back here and wanted to let it all out."

Soon afterward, he bought a 1½-acre parcel in the steep Lagunitas hills for $38,000, adding another half-acre later. Like many of his back-to-the-land neighbors in West Marin, Hoffman set out to transform the property himself. Unlike them, he never stopped.

A chicken coop appeared, then became a bedroom. He razed a carport to construct an ornate tea room. The structures multiplied, whimsy inseparable from function: A retaining pond and well whose pump was housed in a mock tugboat. A "Solar Power Shower Tower." An elaborate system for filtering rainwater, gray-water and blackwater through pools, worm beds and terraced organic gardens.

Hoffman attributes his 45-year fascination with organic farming, vermiculture and wastewater systems to his time in India and Nepal. Other fascinations developed over the years. "I've been cursed with too many passions in life," he says. He planted 5 acres of heirloom wheat varieties and milled the grains himself. The garden plots filled with rare potato plants he imported from Peru. When he switched from wood-fired stove to solar cooker, he discovered that cooking in stone pots gave him the best flavor ("I hate plastic," he adds, with malice), and so he flew to South Korea to commission pots of his own design.

A series of businesses helped fund the construction. Books. Rugs. He invented a method to clean ancient textiles for museums with sonic vibrations. Scouting tea was a hobby that grew into another enterprise.

"I made my first trip to China because I couldn't find any good tea here," he says. In the early 1990s, Hoffman sold the textile-cleaning equipment he'd invented and traveled even more widely — to Zhejiang province for flat-bladed Dragonwell, to Guandong for spindly, floral Phoenix Mountain oolongs. He began collecting puers in Hong Kong teashops and ended up visiting farmers in the mountains of Yunnan.

At his Tea Museum in Lagunitas, clockwise from top, tea expert David Lee Hoffman hands tea to a customer; a puer brick (center) and silk-wrapped puer cakes (left) on display; friend Bob Bruce (left) holds down a cylinder of hua juan tea while Hoffman saws it open to retrieve the leaves inside.

Despite the fact that he was not fluent in spoken or written Mandarin, each trip brought him to new regions and rarer teas. As the export market opened and his reputation grew, the Chinese feted him with television profiles and industry banquets.

Silk Road Teas, operating out of Hoffman's property, primarily sold to retail brands like Republic of Tea, but also tapped into an audience willing to pay for premium Chinese teas. Sebastian Beckwith, co-founder of the New York City-based In Pursuit of Tea, says that where other companies would import a couple varieties of green tea, Hoffman would sell 30. He'd spend half an hour on the phone with a curious collector who'd end up spending $30. "David did more for education in the early (U.S.) market than anyone else," Beckwith says.

Hoffman added to his construction projects a cave where he could age his teas without requiring electricity for air circulation or climate control. He excavated into the hills, pouring 100,000 pounds of concrete to line the walls. There, from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, Hoffman filed away teas by the tons — actually, tens of tons.

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By 2002, Silk Road Teas was doing $1 million in gross annual sales despite the fact that, as Hoffman frequently jokes, he had no innate talent for business. When he decided that the company had grown too unwieldy, he sold it to Catherine and Ned Heagerty, the latter a former Silicon Valley entrepreneur.

The negotiations, Ned Heagerty says, took two years, partly because of Hoffman's lack of business acumen. Yet the new owner adds that the long courtship, in which the two traveled to China numerous times, was "something wonderful."

"The beauty was that we were drinking some of the best tea China had to offer," Heagerty says. "Not only was it a great introduction to tea, my introduction started at the top."

The sale, finalized in 2004, did not include the contents of the tea cave, which Hoffman attributes to Heagerty's disinterest, and Heagerty to Hoffman's unwillingness to part with his puers. Hoffman consulted for the new owner for a few years, but eventually parted ways.

Supposedly, he turned his focus back to the Last Resort. Instead, he returned to China to buy more tea. Hoffman says he saw the collection as an investment that could help sustain the Last Resort. "I'd rather have a good stash of puers than a stack of money," he says. "At least with tea I can enjoy it and share it."

In those days, puer was so cheap that he amassed 200,000 pounds of it. Many of the teas he bought, like the baskets and logs on display at the Tea Museum, were heicha, or non-Yunnanese fermented "dark teas," which were little known even in China.

Around 2010, Hoffman started the Phoenix Collection, competing directly against the company he'd sold just six years before.

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In those short few years, the Chinese puer market had changed.

In 2006 and 2007, a frenzy of speculation on puer cakes gripped China, akin to the 17th century Dutch tulip craze. Farmers picked every bud that sprouted, trying to meet the demand. Fakeries proliferated. Investors tracked the skyrocketing price of their holdings in the puer press. As Jinghong Zhang chronicled, unpressed tea from Yiwu, one of the most famous mountains, shot up from 50 to 120 Chinese yuan per kilo in 2005 to over 400 yuan ($92) in 2007. A year later, the market collapsed, and the price dropped by three-quarters.

The boom and bust, however ruinous to speculators, signaled to all of China the value that Cantonese and Taiwanese collectors had long placed on aged puer. Prices slowly rebounded, eventually surpassing the heights of the boom. Merchants now compete for the best leaves, valuing those from older, wilder trees over Communist-era plantations. As incomes in China have risen, so, too, has the Chinese market for high-end teas. "The domestic market has become my biggest competitor," Heagerty says.

Since the boom, too, an American community of puer collectors has coalesced. "The common trajectory that people go through with tea drinking is they start on the lighter end, and then they get to dark-roasted oolongs," says Max Falkowitz, a writer and editor at Saveur magazine. "As they're drinking more with their bodies and appreciating the somatic and emotional effects of tea, that's where puer starts to interest them."

Americans, Brits, Singaporeans and Europeans — many of them in their 20s and early 30s — now discuss tea on English-language websites like Steepster as well as in Facebook groups, private Slack channels and Reddit boards. Falkowitz characterizes the online puer community as "fractious, competitive and often pedantic, but at the same time, really generous with their knowledge and experience and generous with their tea."

A new generation of tea producers and vendors, many based in China, has arisen to supply this market, selling through their own websites or via eBay. Online, specifics are everything: which mountain a tea comes from, whether the trees came from a plantation or a semi-wild arbor, even the name of the farmer. In the case of older puers, vendors may specify whether the tea was stored in dry or humid conditions, considering how significant the effect humidity has on the taste of aged puers.

Hoffman professes ignorance of the online community, and for the most part, they ignore him, too.

The Phoenix Collection accepts orders only via telephone, but the real disconnect is in its approach to tea. Hoffman says, "You should never buy a tea you haven't tasted." The online community can't visit Lagunitas.

The lack of specifics in his catalog is befuddling. Hoffman makes regular forays into the cave, excavates another haul, then figures out what he's discovered. He doesn't read much Chinese, so he briefly names and dates the teas based on the sketchy information he remembers about their provenance, trusting in his palate. (His palate, several people in the industry

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S.F.'s tea connoisseur

David Lee Hoffman may own the largest puer collection in the United States. The second largest may well belong to Roy Fong, owner of the Imperial Tea Garden in San Francisco and Berkeley and the subject of a December 2016 profile in The Chronicle.

In the decade before Fong opened Imperial Tea Court in 1993, he was a wholesale tea importer who represented Menghai, the largest Chinese state-owned puer factory.

Michael Short / Special To The Chronicle

Fong has worked with the same broker in Yunnan for 30 years to source tea leaves, traveling to China to oversee their pressing into cakes. He stores tens of thousands of pounds of puer in his warehouse, monitoring them regularly and introducing teas to the shop only when they are ready to drink.

Like Hoffman, he pays little attention to the online puer community. Like the Phoenix Collection, the Imperial Tea Court receives visits from Chinese collectors. Fong is so protective of his best vintages that he refuses to sell them to people who appear to value the investment over the taste.

Whereas Les Blank's documentary helped cement Hoffman's mythos as the "Indiana Jones of tea," the white man who delves deep into the (heavily populated) wilds to unearth hidden treasures, the Hong Kong-born Fong sees himself as continuing a longer tradition of Chinese tea culture.

"I always thought, as a Cantonese tea merchant, it's your duty to collect and age puer for the next generation," he says. In Hong Kong, some vendors sell the teas their grandparents acquired. "You collect them, you age them, you learn from them, and you pass them on to whoever comes after you."

—Jonathan Kauffman

Photos by Nicole Boliaux / The Chronicle

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confirm, is excellent.) There is no Chinese equivalent to Hoffman's Northern Californian tea cave, either, so only those who taste his teas in person can verify whether they are aging well.

At the same time, the Phoenix Collection's mailing list has grown to 1,000. Chinese merchants have sniffed out his collection, too. They fly to the Bay Area to snap up choice older vintages, selling them to wealthy collectors back home for thousands of dollars.

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When I visit the Last Resort for a tour, Hoffman won't even point out where the tea cave is.

Instead, we sit on a terrace looking over his property and the wooded valley below. A breeze through the Lagunitas hills directs the wind chimes in a fairy-bell cantata. Hummingbirds buzz our ears. We can feel the vibration of their wings.

After 45 years of construction, the Last Resort resembles a village in the Himalayas, or perhaps the set of "Game of Thrones" a few weeks before filming. Buildings push against one another as if they are huddling for warmth, linked by walkways and steps that require caution to navigate. Pot shards, boards and doll heads are heaped in random corners. The canted, tiled roof of Hoffman's unfinished magnum opus, his tea room, may dominate the view, but it's easy to get distracted by other sights. A boat. A baby bulldozer. The Grand Pissoir, his compostable toilet, to which the county of Marin particularly objects.

Court records show that the county issued its first stop-work order in 1988. The county issued new violations in 1999, then again in 2000, 2001, 2007, 2009 and 2011.

Hoffman waved them all off. "Back then there were people in the county that loved my place," he says. He claims when he asked the senior building inspector what he needed to do to bring the property into compliance, the guy winked and told him to get out of there.

As Hoffman tells of his fight with Marin County, a trickster theme keeps bubbling up — the wily rascal who has spent his life flouting authority in Afghanistan, China and Lagunitas. The inventor as stubborn iconoclast. The visionary, forging ahead of the law.

Those old Marin bureaucrats have all retired. Now, according to county counsel Bryan Case, the county just wants Hoffman to make his property safe.

The violations aren't limited to bad wiring or overly steep steps. According to a December 2016 evaluation that building forensics consultant LaCroix Davis prepared on the Last Resort, the self-taught builder has constructed houses that might collapse in an earthquake and wells that might drown someone who accidentally falls in. Environmental health inspectors have also expressed concern that Hoffman's blackwater system would contaminate a nearby watercourse and the San Geronimo Creek.

After the county court ordered Hoffman off the property in 2012 and levied $226,672 in fees — he refused to pay, he kept building — it finally appointed a receiver in 2015.

The receiver, Eric Beatty, is charged with bringing the property up to compliance, using its value to pay all fees and expenses. Some structures may need to be demolished for safety.

Hoffman claims that, with interest included, the county wants him to pay a half-million dollars and worries it could easily acquire the money by razing the land and selling it, bare. Beatty asserts that he is proceeding slowly with the evaluation and remediation. He has let Hoffman live on the property, only insisted the Phoenix Collection move off-site — hence the shop and Tea Museum down the hill.

A boat, from top, is just one of many eclectic items Hoffman keeps on his 2-acre property in Lagunitas, which is under court-appointed receivership; a hand-carved door; a collection of masks that Hoffman passes on the way to his tea house.

In the meantime, hundreds of Hoffman's supporters and neighbors have rallied around his eccentric estate. They've filed petitions, met with county supervisors and appealed to the county architectural commission, updating supporters through a website, thelastresortlagunitas.org. They are trying to secure historic preservation status, although the property is six years short of the required 50-year mark. Another trick for the trickster.

Jo Farb Hernandez, executive director of Spaces, has joined their crusade. Spaces is a nonprofit that advocates for "folk art environments" like the Watts Towers in Los Angeles or Nitt Witt Ridge in Cambria (San Luis Obispo County). The Last Resort, she argues, doesn't just deserve to be preserved for its cultural and artistic merit. She also sees great value in Hoffman's model of sustainability. "Given the water issues that we have in California, people have to pay attention to forward-thinkers. And forward-thinkers are often breaking the rules."

Hoffman says that love for the planet fuels his passion for the Last Resort and his willingness to flout the law. "As much as the county is condemning my work, the fact is, (these systems) work!" he says. "I can demonstrate the usefulness of this. And it's easily adaptable to large-scale environments."

"I'd rather have a good stash of puers than a stack of money. At least with tea I can enjoy it and share it."

David Lee Hoffman, tea expert

After fighting the county for a decade now, however, he's exhausted. Lyme disease has shrunk his ambitions even further. "My goal is to sell off all the tea and then close the doors," he says, staving off demolitions and evictions long enough to do it.

He has 100,000 pounds to go.

Phoenix Collection Tea Museum, 7282 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Suite 1, Lagunitas; (415) 488-9017, thephoenixcollection.com.

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