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Author(s)	David Stratton
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Eat A Bowl Of Tea

Cannes A Columbia Pictures release of an American Playhouse Theatrical film. Executive producers, Lindsay Law, John K. Chan. Produced by Tom Sternberg. Directed by Wayne Wang. Screenplay, Judith Rascoe, based on novel by Louis Chu; camera (Deluxe color), Amir Mokri; editor, Richard Candib; music, Mark Adler; production design, Bob Ziemnicki; associate producer, Patricia Chong; production manager, Diane V. Raikes; assistant director, Mark Bashaar. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight), May 17, 1989. MPAA Rating: PG-13. Running time: 102 MIN.

Mei Oi	Cora Miao
Ben Loy	Russell Wong
Wah Gay	Victor Wong
Bok Fat	Lee Sau Kee
Ah Song	Eric Tsiang Chi Wai

■ Wayne Wang returns to Chinatown with "Eat A Bowl Of Tea," and recaptures the relaxed humor and deep emotions of his earlier "Dim Sum" in the process. By its very nature, this will be a limited-release film, with fest outings indicated, but it should find enthusiastic responses in the right outlets.

Film starts with a voiceover reminder that, for 60 years, American policy was to bar entry of women from China into the U.S. As a result, men who came from China in the years prior to World War II were forced to leave behind mothers, wives and sisters. That changed after the war, in which China was a U.S. ally, and the pic starts off with Wah Gay (Victor Wong), who runs a New York gambling club, deciding to send his soldier son Ben Loy (Russell Wong) to China to marry the daughter of his best friend. Fortunately, it's love at first sight between Ben and Mei Oi (Cora Miao), and they marry and return to the States, where Ben's delighted father presents him with a Chinese restaurant for a wedding present.

Unfortunately, Ben finds the pressures of running the business so severe that his love life suffers. A doctor advises a vacation, which is a successful remedy, but only in the short term. Basically, poor Ben is impotent, causing grief to his wife as well as to the couple's fathers, who eagerly want to become grandfathers.

Enter Ah Song (Eric Tsiang Chi Wai), a cheerful, rascally gambler who becomes Mei's secret lover, and who succeeds in getting her pregnant. But when word gets out that Ben isn't the father, it's Wah Gay who tries to restore family honor by attacking Ah Song with a meat ax.

Typically, the aforementioned scene is played for laughs, and indeed is the comic high point of a generally charming and amusing film. As in "Dim Sum," Wang takes his time to allow the audience to get to know characters he himself obviously has great feeling for, and the result is a most pleasant experience. He also creates the atmosphere of the late '40s via film clips (the lovers first kiss at a screening of Frank Capra's "Lost Horizon" and later take in a screening of Orson Welles' "The Lady From Shanghai") and some evocative songs (the meat ax scene is backed by a vocalization of "How High The Moon").

Judith Rascoe has done a great adaptation of Louis Chu's 1961 novel (the title refers to the eventual cure for Ben's impotence) which has provided perfect material for Wang to demonstrate his skill with this kind of gentle comedy. Production values are on the highest level.—Strat.