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East meets Midwest
at Gong Fu Tea, in
Des Moines.

[Neighborhood Watch]

East Village, Des Moines, Iowa

Any mention of Iowa often evokes images of cornfields, pigs, or presidential hopefuls. At least until you reach this neighborhood—mostly shuttered until a few years ago—tucked between the Des Moines River and the state capitol. Today an urban buzz emanates from streets lined with sculptural bike racks designed by Iowan artists, and brick buildings housing boutiques, restaurants, and lofts. On Friday evenings during the summer, scout bargains from street vendors and enjoy free blues concerts at the State Historical Building (600 East Locust St.).

» **Gong Fu Tea** (414 East Sixth St.) Perch on a mat in the serenity room and sip from a steaming cup of "Ancient Happiness," or one of the other 127 loose-leaf teas stored in large silver canisters behind the counter, before shopping for handcrafted tea wares and tea-inspired candles.

» **Sticks American Craft Gallery** (521 East Locust St.) Join other customers chatting on the whimsical furniture in this hands-on shop, which specializes in home objects handcrafted in Des Moines. You'll find everything from beds and grandfather clocks to side tables and ornaments.

» **Zzz Records** (424 East Locust St.) Nab a 25-cent Tootsie Pop from the antique vending machine before poring over more than 16,000 records at this independent music store, which boasts vinyl by everyone from Bright Eyes to the Beatles.

» **The Continental** (428 East Locust St.) Known for its cocktails and small-plate cuisine from around the world, this bar and restaurant serves a mean mojito as well as an even tastier vodka version named after the bar (\$6.50 each). Stop by for happy hour during the week to taste tapas dishes from \$2 to \$5, or visit Thursday through Saturday for live jazz.

» **Eden** (500 East Grand Ave.) This sunny, delicious-smelling boutique is known for its full stock of bath, baby, and home items. Inspect Kiehl's beauty products, and Caldrea cleaning supplies arranged on antique display tables. Be sure to check out the shop's newest addition of baby items, including Bugaboo strollers and Petunia Pickle Bottom diaper bags. —Julie Collins

Location: Take I-235 to the East Sixth St. exit and travel two blocks south. From downtown, take buses 1, 4, 5, or 7 east to stops on Locust St. between East Fourth and Pennsylvania Ave.