

Global Tea Hut



NEWSLETTER #1, FEBRUARY 2012

As we steep and pour this first cup, welcoming you all to the Global Tea Hut, let us introduce ourselves and get comfortable. It will take a minute for the kettle to boil, anyway...

The tea hut is out in the forest for two reasons: solace and guidance. We travel up the winding path to the hermit's hut to share some tea, finding a bit of quiet in a turbid world, solace from the storm and peace in that space. We also, sometimes, go for wisdom and direction, cultivated in that loving-silence. Beyond quiet or wise words, however, a tea space has a magic way of transforming people; and it's more than just some time by themselves or the words of power the master speaks. A true ceremony of Cha Dao brings about change in people. And it is our goal to facilitate such transformation, and to afford you the tools you need to map out and ultimately build your own hermit's hut, right in the center of your mountain-chest, forested heart.

Your energy will help manifest our dreams physically: of building a mountain retreat center all tea lovers can call home, a place of meditation and solace, as well as community and service; a place to come to be transformed, and more importantly to learn the tools you will

need to make that transformation lasting by taking it home with you.

It is very important that we treat this giving of money and mailing of tea as a gift exchange. If you feel like you are purchasing tea, you may feel entitled or disappointed with the tea or amount. If we exchange gifts, however, we both find joy in the process, and grow closer to each other: you in giving charity and us in sharing some of the spirit of our center.

The tea is almost ready, so let's slip into a love for the silence that surrounds tea. Before we do, please keep in mind that in drinking this tea you are entering a giant, global hut of tea brothers and sisters. Raise your bowl to them. As we all drink this wonderful elixir, may the barriers of time and space break, and may we find ourselves seated next to all our fellow tea-wayfarers, past and present: from the great mystics that cloudwalked ancient China to the Zen masters of Japan, from the great Gong Fu masters to all the wonderful tea people alive now, who from Russia to LA are sharing this same tea with us all.

**May you have a thousand, thousand bowls—
Each one the Morning Dew**

**This month we have also included a piece of hand-painted calligraphy by Master WuDe soaked in old Puerh. It says "Cha Dao (the Way of Tea)".*

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Your Tea of the Month, February 2012

2010 Mt. Ai Lao Sheng Puerh

All Puerh tea comes from Yunnan province in the Southwest of China, a magical place. It is home to twenty-five percent of all species, plant and animal, in all of China. Mystic and vibrant, it is a blossoming of life, rain, aroma and growth. It is, in fact, the birthplace of all tea, and home to more varieties of tea trees than anywhere else on earth. Yunnan is a series of stepped plateaus, the westernmost of which neighbors Tibet. The waters that flow through this region all originate within crystal mountain springs and glacial streams high up in the Himalayas. Puerh is unique for several reasons.

There are two large families of tea trees: large and small leaf. Large-leaf trees have a single trunk, deep roots and can live for thousands of years. Small-leaf varieties have a single root system that expands horizontally, for the most part, and several trunks—more like a bush. They don't live as long. Puerh is the paragon of the former, large-leaf, old-growth trees. These ancient trees grow up in the jungle, connected in harmony with insects, plants, snakes and animals. They are also covered in hundreds, if not thousands of species of microorganisms, even before the leaves are picked.

There are two kinds of Puerh tea: sheng and shou. Puerh tea is picked, withered (to oxidize and dehydrate the tea), fried (to kill green enzymes that make tea bitter as well as to arrest oxidation), rolled (to break down the cells and expose the inner essence of the tea), and finally sun-dried. If the tea is then left to ferment naturally, in conjunction with the endless microbes in it, it is called “sheng” or “raw” Puerh. If the tea is then piled and sprayed with water, covered in thermal blankets and turned in order to artificially ferment it, it is called “shou” or

“ripe” Puerh. This tea we've given you from Mt. Ai Lao is a sheng tea, though a very unique one.

Ai Lao is amongst the most remote areas of Yunnan. It is also one of the highest, peaking at 3200 meters—the second highest in Yunnan after Mt. Wu Liang. Most Puerh tea comes from the areas of Xishuangbanna and Lincang. This underdeveloped region has been left alone, uninterrupted by the great Puerh boom that has transformed so much of the region, and often for the worst. The roads are hardly more than climbing, dirt paths, the people and forest untouched til now. The altitude and rocky soil make the trees here unique amongst Puerh—lacking some of the vibrancy of the lower jungles, but gaining an affinity with the minerals of the mountain, as well as the sun and moon.

This tea comes from a village about 2500 meters up. The trees are all wild and semi-wild and age from 200-300 years old. What makes this tea one of the most unique Puerh teas we have ever encountered is that first the village is a co-op, working together to protect and preserve the tea. This situation prevents the greed and environmental destruction that has plagued much of the Puerh industry in the last 10 years. And secondly, these villagers have developed a slightly unique processing methodology that they say is in response to the tea. Adapting processing over time in response to particular varieties of tea is common throughout China, but very, very rare in Yunnan. Puerh tea has always been much more about the trees and much less about the skill of processing the tea, which is one of the reasons it was often dismissed as a lesser-quality tea before its sudden explosion into popularity in the early 2000's. Therefore, much of the

differences in Puerhs lies in the trees. And since farmers do not adapt their processing to suit the season and weather as much as other regions, you can sometimes find small faults in a particular region's tea from year to year (which are usually mitigated by aging the tea). It is incredible indeed to find a Puerh tea processed in a slightly unique way, especially consciously in an effort to improve the tea.

This tea goes through a slight piling immediately after being picked, akin to red tea. Don't confuse this piling for the post-production, wet piling of shou Puerh. Red tea is piled after it's picked to increase oxidation. With red tea this usually continues for twelve to twenty-four hours. With this special Puerh tea, however, the piling of the green leaves was only done for a few hours. The more heavily-oxidized tea was then fried, rolled and sun-dried like normal Puerh. The added oxidation gives the tea a greater depth and sweetness, and the liquor is a deeper golden color. You can still taste the depth and beauty of the old trees, though.

Everyone at our center has a special relationship with this tea, which is why we chose it as our first tea of the month. It is often a tea we take out and serve when we set up our stalls. It warms and lingers, filling you with its living presence. If you are sensitive you can taste the altitude and the special relationship this tea has with the moon, living in areas that aren't as deeply forested as southern Yunnan (nor as barren as other high-mountain teas like those in Taiwan). After 2004, some of us were in despair, watching greed and corruption run rampant throughout Yunnan and cause so many environmental problems. This was one of the teas that restored hope, bringing light: a village working together as a co-op, making decisions as a group and with a spirit of preservation and sustainability.

We hope that as your relationship to this amazing tea begins, you find in it a bit of us, as we find in it a bit of you.

Like people, tea gets a bit ruffled up flying around the world. Better give it some time to get over its jet lag before drinking, a week or two should be fine.



For future issues, submit questions to globalteahut@gmail.com

Throughout all the workshops we have conducted perhaps no question surfaces as much as people wondering where and how to go about purchasing tea amidst all the variety in the world. Tea is spiritual, it is incarnated fully—spiritual in the fullest sense, which is to say that it spans the whole spectrum from physical to Nature and beyond. There is therefore a tremendous amount of less-than-ideal tea: made out of harmony or even in destruction of Nature, or processed in a conversation of greed and personal profit, which defeats the purpose of drinking it: connection and harmony with our inner way as well as the Great Way. How then does one go about finding tea, especially as part of a healthy spiritual life? And how can tea facilitate a communion with Nature, each other and ourselves if it is made in a poisonous, destructive way?

I think that the best way to approach this issue is to move from the abstract to the specific; and since this month's tea is a Puerh, let's end our discussion there. To begin with, we must start by questioning the need to search for tea at all. Why seek communion with Nature? You *are* Nature, so why not let it come to you? In this tradition, we often say: "as the man seeks the Leaf, the Leaf seeks the man." This is powerful life wisdom indeed. Instead of asking how to seek out tea, why not ask why you are seeking at all? Let the tea find you. It speaks for Nature, and has a way of drinking us just as we think we are drinking it. Let it change you. Spirituality is all about *allowing*, not creating, forcing, making or finding. All that you are is already within you, endlessly and completely!

But we can pave the way for better, purer teas to find a way into our lives. In or-

der to do this, you might welcome the Goddess of all Herbs in two ways: First create a pure space for her. She wants to enter a place where she will be revered. Make a time in your day and a space in your life where the tea will be appreciated and respected, where true openness and communication awaits her, and she will enter such a space smilingly. Secondly, there must be a willingness to share. If you wish to enhance yourself, control or selfishly possess her, she will see walking into that space as a movement towards stagnation. Fine tea wants to be shared; it wants to be human and through us find conscious expression. It binds and deepens our relationships with each other because it is in harmony with Nature and us, and because we have the physical and spiritual receptors to receive it.

Traveling on, you can begin to discriminate tea. In this tradition, we like to start with just two categories: living and dead. A living tea is one grown in a wholesome way, in harmony with Nature. When a living tea enters you a dialogue immediately ensues. There is no doubt at all that the tea is alive. Dead teas are often more about sensual satisfaction, but leave no lasting trace; they don't bring your body to life in the same way. The details of different production methodologies is perhaps something we can discuss in further detail in later issues of these newsletters. For now, it is enough that you begin to recognize a living tea from a dead one. And the Ai Lao you have received herein is *definitely* alive!

The world of Puerh tea is very rich—a deep and vast bowl stretching so far that you can't see the other rim except on the clearest of days. There will, therefore, always be exceptions to any principles or guidelines we

give you to finding nice Puerh. Consequently, you should use these principles as rough outlines rather than firm rules. As we mentioned, there are two kinds of Puerh: sheng and shou. Get to know these terms. They are “raw” and “ripe” in English. Raw Puerh is the older variety, and more like green tea. It is fermented naturally over time through aging. Shou Puerh is “cooked”, which means it goes through artificial fermentation—basically wet-piling under thermal blankets. When purchasing young, green sheng Puerh it is almost always better to find personal, small-production, boutique tea rather than anything from the bigger factories. This is because the old-growth trees in the jungle, which have all the characteristics that make Puerh tea so spectacular, yield in too small of an amount to make the arduous trip up unpaved, poor roads worthwhile for the larger factories. They mostly use large-scale industrialized, plantation tea, which means pesticides, chemical fertilizers and weed-killers, etc. For that reason, choose tea pro-

duced by people who love tea rather than money, hiking up and selecting old-growth teas in smaller amounts. With shou tea, however, the opposite is true: choose large-factory production when you are a beginner. Shou Puerh can be a dangerous tea, due to all the bacteria in the wet-piling process. Big factories like Menghai have been doing this for decades. They have the experience and hygienic facilities to make sure it is done in a sanitary way. This outweighs the source of the tea. Very little shou tea is old-growth anyway, because such tea is too valuable as sheng to be made into shou tea.

If any of the latter principles felt too complicated to you, stick to the more general practice of letting the tea you need find you, preparing a sacred home and time for it and a willingness to share with all those you love and all those you have yet to love. In that way, you’ll see that the Leaf, in the end, has a mystical way of finding you, like old and fated friends!

Puerh is typically made in this way:

Sheng/Raw: withering > frying > rolling > sun drying

Shou/Ripe: withering > frying > rolling > *(piling) > sun drying > *(piling)

*The piling can occur before or after drying; if after, the tea is rehydrated

**Sheng and Shou Puerh can both be compressed/shaped into cakes.

***Ripe Puerh is produced in the same way as Raw, but with the additional step of wet-piling, a process similar to composting.

February's Tea-brewing Tips

Each newsletter, we plan to offer some tips on brewing tea with “gong fu”. Gong Fu means mastery, inner and outer. As you improve your sensitivity, you can begin to ask your teas how they want to be brewed, rather than the way you want it to be brewed. So much in life is done quickly and conveniently, and often without any respect. Let us approach tea with reverence, and prepare it the way it asks to be.

The first and most important experiment you can do is easy. It actually helps you more deeply understand many of the later experiments. You will need three identical cups. It also helps to use a tea that you are very familiar with. You may also want to repeat the experiment with water. The experiment is easy: pour all the tea into the first cup. From that cup pour half into the second, and then again half of that into the third. Drink all three cups quickly, switching often back and forth. What is different in them? Which one is better, and why?

We aren't going to give you the answers; you will have to do the work. Experience is what counts, if you are to master anything. True understanding only comes with involvement, which is why one of the teacher's greatest gifts to the student is the opportunity to participate!



In the Zendo

*This Zen tea story is from Master Wu De's upcoming book **Zen & Tea One Flavor**. In the first part, we "Have a Cup" in the form of a traditional Zen story that involves tea; and then "while the next one is steeping" Wu De discusses the story's medicine. We hope you enjoy the preview...*

Have a cup

One of the wisest professors at the University of Punditry had reached the end of a long and prosperous career, with an alphabet of letters after his name and a paragraph of awards to put in the small biographies printed on the backs of his many books. He smiled and accepted compliments, pretending to be modest while his face betrayed the fact that he was basking in it all. Despite his intellectualism and the fact that he had lived so disembodied that most ordinary people couldn't understand what he was saying—despite his “elephantiasis of the ratiocination organ” (as he himself would call it), he did deep down wish to understand the Truth, the world and even perhaps himself. He wasn't really content.

He had spent twenty years seeking answers in the library, discussing and re-discussing his ideals over and again in the jargon he and others had created. They sent memos—and later in their careers, emails—arguing the nuances of what “Truth” itself meant (because, of course, one had to establish all that before any real understanding could begin). However, now, at the end of this long, winding path through academia, he still felt hollow, as if he was in fact no closer to understanding why he was here or what life was about.

A friend of the family was over for dinner one night and described a recent trip to the mountains. He mentioned meeting a monk who lived way up a winding trail in a small temple. He said the monk had become quite famous in the region for his wisdom

and perspicacity. The scholar's ears perked up. Perhaps one such as this would have the answers to life. What did it all mean? Is there a God? What happens when we die...

As he planned for the trip, the scholar made lists of questions—crossing some out with red ink and rewriting them. He then paced his study memorizing them, as it would be unseemly to bring the actual list before the monk. He insisted that his family stay behind in the small village, hiking up the trail himself. After a long, grueling trek, he found the small temple and adjoining cottage.

The monk invited him in. When he said that he had come from far away to ask the monk some questions of the utmost importance, the old man asked him to sit down and insisted that they first drink some tea. This made the impatient scholar a bit peeved, as he had waited so many years and was anxious to test the wisdom of one who hadn't read nearly enough books, but he agreed out of politeness. As the water boiled the old monk glanced out the window at the mountains, and the scholar thought he was being ignored. He used the time to organize his questions in his mind, silently counting them off on his fingers.

When the tea was ready, the monk placed a bowl before the scholar and leaned over with the teapot. His wizened hands were perfectly steady, and the stream of tea poured so smoothly it appeared soft in the dim light—it poured, and poured and poured. Soon the tea reached the rim of the cup. Then beyond. It spilled over the table and splashed

7 onto the mat next to the scholar with a resounding “Hey! What are you doing?!” The old monk set the pot down gently and gestured to the brimming cup with his eyes, “Your mind is like that cup, so pray tell me: Where am I to pour the wisdom you seek?”

While the next pot is steeping

Is your cup full or empty? Do you come to your tea as 5.2 grams of Puerh tea harvested by the Menghai factory in 1997 using the 8582 recipe, with slightly larger leaves....or are you empty? Can your cup hold the tea you wish to drink, or has it too become something you’ve filled with ideas, opinions, questions or comments? And can we really enjoy the aroma, the flavor or the comfort of a cup of fine tea when we’ve made of it but another topic in our libraries?

There is enough to think about, worry about and debate in our lives without making the times set aside for our relaxation into something serious. Instead, let tea be just leaves and water. Approach it with an empty mind, ready to learn from the liquor itself rather than from a book on tea processing, history or other trivia. Some of that is fun and we’re all curious; it can also be useful when purchasing tea, for knowing about tea production makes one an aware consumer. However, now that the tea is before us, let us wash away all the intellectual traps, whether about tea, Zen, spirituality, the Way we should live or even the Way we should drink tea...just leaves and water.

There aren’t any questions about yourself to which you don’t already have the answers. There is nothing about the tea you need to know which isn’t taught by the liquor itself. There is no need to record the moment with an internal dialogue—no need to describe the tea. There is just leaves and water.

When asked how to practice Zen, the master responded: “Drop all opinions!”

Don’t approach tea as the scholar in this cup-story. Don’t come to the mountain hermitage of your tea space with a lot of questions in the form of words. Instead, sit down before your cup of tea with a clear, relaxed mind—open to any wisdom it brews. This is, in fact, how the Zen adept approaches life: as if each moment was the master, and there was something to learn from every blade of grass. The tea sessions, like any words that could describe them, are just “fingers pointing at the moon”. They are a basket to convey something deeper. And that is why Japanese tea masters have often called tea books, tearooms and even their disciples by names like: “forgotten Basket (*Bosen*)” or “Abandoned Basket (*Hosen*)”. After the basket carries something, it is abandoned.

Dump out your cup. Throw out all you have learned about meditation, tea or the Way. There is no need to understand tea when we can let the tea understand us. A simple, empty cup or bowl resting on the table as it awaits tea is the perfect symbol of the Zen mind: always beginning, always humble and waiting.

Lao Tzu often said that it was the spaces between a house’s walls that made it useful, the hollow part of a pitcher that held the water; and, we may add, it is the freedom of the empty cup that makes it beautiful: I am that cup, humble and indiscriminate. The cup doesn’t object. It holds great and mediocre tea alike. It also remains untainted after the tea is drunk. It is filled with a tea for some time and then releases it without a trace. Thoughts also pass through my mind, like tea through this cup; and let them also leave no traces to taint my future tea sessions. Let my mind also spend the majority of its time empty, so that when the tea is finally poured it will be fresh and new, unaffected by any cups I’ve drunk in the past. The tea I had before doesn’t matter—only this cup! The moments that have gone or

are yet to come also are not in this cup here before me. Without judgment, plain and undorned wisdom is poured into me, emptied again, poured, emptied... If your mind is too full, empty it; and if it's empty, fill it. That is the natural and skillful use of a cup: empty... full...empty....full...

Your cup is now empty and awaiting the tea that will soon be poured, filling you with wisdom and Truth more palpable and real than any concept of an experience can ever be.

Each sip is pure, unadulterated living wisdom and monumental presence, here and now. This is your life, it isn't elsewhere and there is no need to think about it, rationalize it or analyze it—just drink it!

You devas should know that all such forms are taught by buddhas according to the ways of the world and not according to their inexpressible meaning.

—The Buddha—



THE FOUR PILLARS

We thought you would like to know some more about where this tradition comes from. Here are the four pillars on which it is founded. We will include some more information in future issues.

The Way of Tea as we rediscover and recreate it (or it us) must firstly pay homage to Nature, Heaven and Earth from whose unspoken center people and tea trees grow. Then through a vast and ancient mountain chain of tea wisdom, we also travel down the trails blazed by all the great known and unknown sages of tea: those who cloudwalked early Chinese peaks, retreated to forest hermitages, or practiced Zen tea in Japan and Korea, as well as the gongfu skills of Southern Chinese tea traditions. More specifically, we bow to modern teachers of tea throughout the world, less for preserving tradition and form than for keeping and sharing the spirit of the Leaf then and now. Like such ancient tea sages, we promote, cultivate and express an awakening of harmony through tea, at a time when it is so very needed in the world; and like those before us we do so simply and without asking anything in return.

There are four pillars which support the building on which any modern practice of tea must begin, and upon which our particular tradition is founded. Understanding them is very important if one is to make progress in Cha Dao. It would be impossible for us to transmit any of the tea wisdom we have without these forces flowing through us. After all, none of our wisdom is new. It has been around for millennia. And none of it is our creation; we are merely the vessels in which it is steeped just before it is poured for you. Without our ancestors and teachers we would all be lost. Any intelligent person can learn algebra in a year or two with a competent teacher, but how many could invent it growing up isolated on an island? Even with a hundred lifetimes spent only brewing tea,

some of the insights passing through us like minerals through these four great roots would be missing.

The First Pillar: Great Nature

For a million years, tea trees grew in ancient forests untouched by man. They sat in the silence of Nature—the same ocean of spirit out of which this sun grew, and eventually this earth, rivers then mountains, cells then plants, then animals... And so a thousand page book on Cha Dao would have to include 999 pages written in the language of Nature: bird chirps, wind-rustled leaves and shafts of sun slanting through ancient tea trees. We mustn't forget to pay homage to this aspect of tea, for it is in connection to this Great Spirit of Nature that tea becomes a Dao, and of all the four pillars, this one is the strongest—the oldest and the deepest rooted. In fact, it resembles a tree—twisted and turned, plunging into the darkest part of the earth. It is also the least understood pillar, and it cannot be discussed in any detail in such a manual as this. Its voice is old, cracked and whispers indecipherables to the intellect. You must become spirit if you are to understand its spirit. You must learn its language, written in the runes of the leaf-veins themselves.

The Second Pillar: Shamans and Daoist hermits

The second pillar of this great and ancient tea temple, covered in vines and runes, spells and magic and filled with fragrances and spirits wise and quiet, is the essence of the ancient shamans and Daoist mendicants who retreated to forest hermitages and mountain peaks in ancient times. Many tea books are

written by historians, and such scholars must necessarily begin when tea is first mentioned in writing, which is for all practical purposes the Tang Dynasty (618–907). But mankind's relationship with this sacred herb dates back thousands of years before that. And so the buying and selling, the warring and pleasuring of tea are also the very end of a long story as tea relates to humanity. These forest sages didn't farm tea, but sought it out wild. Some such trees were even famous, as were some of the sages that distilled its liquor. At first, it was aboriginal shamans, medicine men and witches of the forest that drank tea, utilizing it to transmute their own spirits, as healing for others—healing of body, mind and spirit—as well as to transmit wisdom to students. Later, Daoist mendicants would also develop a love for tea. It is important for us to bow to this old forest tradition, and to learn from it by listening to the spirit of these ancient sages as they come alive again in this tradition, however out of time and place it seems.

The Third Pillar: Dhyana

The third pillar of tea is an iron one, straight and smooth—black and radiant to the point of perfect reflection. Like all things tea, the domestication of tea was also sacred. The first farmers were Zen monks. When the early Japanese monks traveled to China to learn Zen, which was called “Chan” there, they also came back with tea seeds, saplings, teaware and preparation methodology. They wrote treatises on the magic of this plant to satisfy the looks of askance on the faces of those who had sent them. After all, they had been sent to copy Buddhist scriptures and bring back Zen, not to study plants. Why this particular plant? Obviously the masters of China, sage indeed, knew that if Zen were to be planted in Japan, tea would also have to be, as the two share “the same flavor.” There are countless Zen stories that involve tea, and every famous tea mountain in China is also home to a Zen monastery. They either built it there

because of wild tea trees, or later brought the trees with them—choosing a place where the tea, not necessarily they themselves, would be happy. For the most part, China lost this tradition of Zen tea. It was fortunately preserved, cultivated and even enhanced in Japan and Korea. And no temple of tea would stand without a pillar founded in Zen tea. We were very fortunate to receive this wisdom in Japan, passed on in spirit and form.

The Fourth Pillar: Gongfu tea

The final pillar is a crooked one, shaped like a graceful crane: perched on one leg, the other rooted beneath the floor; and the roof balanced magically on the smallest tip of one feather of one extended wing. This tradition is the gong fu tea of Southern China, which was developed for the most part by practitioners of martial arts. This tradition is looser and freer. It is an artless art, without any rules, other than those that produce the finest cup of tea. Gong fu tea is about mastery, inner and outer. It is about learning to brew tea the way it wants to be brewed, until the subtlest and most refined aspects of the process become clear as day. Like in martial arts, there is no halfway—you hit or miss based on your skill. The proof is in the cup. We are very fortunate to have come into contact with a very pure tradition of gong fu tea, as it was preserved and enhanced in Malaysia. Many modern traditions have lost the inner aspects of gong fu tea. Without a deep understanding of the inner reasons behind each aspect of tea preparation, many of the outer, more practical aspects of tea have been replaced with quicker and more convenient methods in these modern times.

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Ming Dynasty Kuanyin on the central altar at the center