

AUTUMN 2013 WILD RED TEA FENG QING, YUNNAN, CHINA

As you can see, we've decided to start naming our teas—not to obscure the origin or the linear details about where these teas come from, which we'll still include in each issue, but to celebrate their uniqueness. This month's tea is called "Golden Vajra (*Jing Gang Chu*)". A vajra is an Eastern symbol of spiritual power, which fits this tea well.

We feel that these teas are rare and precious, and deserving of names. All the teas we source for this magazine are either living tea or organic plantation tea. We are committed to the ideal that this magazine support ethically produced, sustainable tea made by people who love tea and Nature. True, living tea is seed-propagated. The trees have room between them and are not pruned, since cutting the crown drastically reduces the roots. Living tea could also be called "garden tea", with less plants and huge biodiversity. Producers of living tea recognize the infinite connections a tree has with its environment, and that removing any cog in the natural ecology disrupts everything, including the tea. This means there are fewer tea trees and that they are indistinguishable from the wildlife around them, interacting with other plants, trees, snakes, insects, etc. Living tea trees are allowed to grow old, and are cared for and approached with respect for whatever amount of tea they offer us.

Many of the teas we offer each month are wild as well, which means they are a powerful representation of the forests they come from. One of the most important aspects of natural seed-propagation is that every tea seed makes a unique tree—and unique teas deserve a better name than just a category like "red tea". This creates diversity and promotes stronger and better trees. In fact, that is precisely why most industrial, plantation tea farmers don't seed-propagate: they use cuttings to clone bushes instead. They do this to achieve uniformity of flavor. Also if a farmer had eight hundred trees they would all have different needs and this would require more work. But in the wild, there is no added work—no fertilization or weeding, only biodiversity and a harvest based on what Nature provides. Sometimes this means that there's only one harvest a year, while other times (like our tea this month) there are autumn buds as well.

As we've discussed in many of these magazines, these mutated varieties coupled with all the different methods of tea processing makes categorization of many teas difficult, like last month's snow buds. Technically, they are processed like white tea (sun-dried), but they are from puerh trees, and very unique ones at that. The snow buds aren't like other white teas, as you surely have tast-

ed by now. This month's tea similarly crosses boundaries, which leaves you wondering whether to classify the tea by its processing methodology or by the trees it came from.

A lot of authors propose an oversimplified classification system based on the idea that all tea is *Camellia sinensis* and the differences in tea are all in the processing. There is some truth in that, but it's also misleading. All the processing methods developed over time, slowly, by farmers who lived and worked with local varieties exclusively. They advanced the different processing techniques in part by listening to the tea and in part by trial and error. Over time they worked out which processing techniques brought out the best in the varieties of tea native to their region. Oolong processing—the most complicated and skillful of all tea processing—was developed in Fujian to suit a particular kind of tea. And while it is true that we could process Wuyi Rou Gui leaves like a red or green tea, it would not be nearly as nice as such. So, as you can see, the kinds of tea were traditionally a bit more than just processing methodology, since processing techniques were specific to certain varieties of trees and terroir.

Nowadays, there is a lot of experimentation, resulting in a tremendous variety of teas. Most of the teas processed like other regions don't turn out so well, but sometimes you find a gem (like this month's tea) and have to wonder if that tea "wanted" to be processed that way. Technically, our tea of the month is a red tea from Yunnan, but it comes from wild Puerh trees that are usually processed as Puerh. We've had the Puerh from this region, and it is almost as nice as the red tea, but the red version has just a little more of a magical sparkle—as if something is unlocked in this processing.

With puerh tea, most of the quality is in the trees, not the processing, anyway. With oolong tea, at least half the quality of any given tea is in the craft of the tea maker and roaster (sometimes they are separate individuals). With puerh, however, it's all about the trees. Unlike other kinds of tea, you can't process a Taiwan tea like puerh and call it "puerh"—you can't process anything as puerh because puerh is a region, and to be a purest it is only old-growth trees from Yunnan. And since "puerh" is ninety-percent the trees, you can see why we feel that last month's tea is more puerh than white tea, and why this month's is also more puerh than red tea. Still, to stick to a classification based on processing, let's review a little about Yunnanese red tea, and red tea in general:

Red tea from Yunnan is often called "Dian Hong". "Dian" is an aboriginal word for Yunnan, so this just means, "Yunnan red". As we have often discussed, 'red tea' is what is often mistakenly called 'black tea' in the



A vajra is an ancient symbol for spiritual power

West. Ordinarily, a name doesn't matter so much and we wouldn't even take the time to correct this age-old mistake, and most vendors don't. But in this case there is an important issue that a Chajin (tea person) will face if this mistake isn't corrected: there is another genre of tea in China called "black tea". So if you call red tea "black", then what do you call black tea? The problem began because early trade between Chinese and Europeans was limited to the ports, and most merchants sailors didn't see the tea trees, farms or processing and learned what they knew through broken Pidgin English on the docks, often from Chinese merchants who didn't care to correct them. Actually, Europeans used to call Oolong tea "black tea" as well, probably because it has the word "black" in the name ("Oolong" means "Black Dragon").

Red tea is fully oxidized. It is picked and withered for a long time, sometimes with machines that blow hot air into large piles of tea. Our tea this month isn't withered with such machines, but rather naturally withered spread out on bamboo mats and initially only very briefly. After that, this tea is fried, which is a step that is completely atypical for red tea—closer to puerh tea. The tea is then rolled, further oxidizing it and breaking down the cells to release more fragrance and essence, but not as long or as deep as most red tea, which can be rolled for up to ninety minutes. Most red tea is roasted dry. After the brief withering, frying and rolling, Golden Vajra is withered again

for a long period of twenty-four hours to fully oxidize it. Finally, it is dried in a cool, shady spot indoors.

Making red tea is a simple process, and even though Yunnan is more famous nowadays for Puerh tea, it has been a region of red tea as well, at least for the last sixty years, producing as much or more red tea as other regions. In fact, Puerh's rise to fame is rather recent, and in Yunnan there have been years of more red tea by volume. But our red tea isn't a plantation tea, growing wild in the forest.

*An autumn dawn
dreaming of spring
ripens the sleeping forest
Green crests awaken
on the way to reds and golds*

*A spring dawn
dreaming of autumn
ripens our sleeping minds
Steaming bowls awaken
on the way to green forests*

—Wu De

Tea of the Month

This month's tea comes from the wild forests of Lincang, in Feng Qing County. The trees are between fifty and one hundred years old. They are protected trees sometimes used for puerh production, and are pure Assamica. Many of the red teas from Yunnan are hybrids that were pressured to produce more buds, making them "tippy", which makes the tea sweeter. If you recall, our tea of the month in January of this year was one such tea, from Wu Liang Mountain. This month's tea, however, is not tippy. There aren't as many buds, and together with the frying, this lends the tea a bit of the depth, Qi and astringency of a puerh. It also means that the tea would be an excellent candidate for aging.

It's semi-rare to get an autumn harvest from wild bushes. Autumn teas tend to be lighter, sweeter and lack the power of spring teas. However, as red tea, this makes the tea floral and bright. The aging from autumn till now has deepened the tea and brought out an orchid flavor, as well as a deeper Yang Qi. For that reason, you'll want to drink it in the morning, hopefully with some of the people you love most. At least all of us will be there with you...



Brewing this Month's Tea

Like last month's tea, this one is for us very much a bowl tea. Remember to follow your heart and brew the way you can, depending on your own teaware as well. Bowl tea is the oldest method of tea brewing on earth, dating back before the pyramids. We brew bowl tea for meditative stillness, simplicity and sharing space with people we care about. Bowl tea is also the simplest brewing method. Any small bowl will do, like a rice bowl for example, if you haven't got a tea bowl. Start by rinsing off your bowl with hot water. Then gently scatter a few of this month's leaves into the bottom of the bowl (three to four—or more if you like your tea stronger). Add some boiling water to the side of the bowl, dancing the leaves in a circle and carrying them under the water so they open up uniformly. Use water with small to medium-sized bubbles, rather than a full rolling boil. As you sip, try holding the bowl with two hands, centering yourself over it.

Some days, we also use a side-handle pot to decant this tea into bowls. Though it would be nice to be able to put all our leaves directly into the bowl as the ancients did, the variety of teas nowadays is much greater than ever before. Long ago, there wasn't much processing methodology, so all tea was simple and lent itself to the bowl or to boiling and then ladling into a bowl. Nowadays, there are so many kinds of tea that won't work in a bowl—teas that are compressed or that have small leaves that would be annoying in a bowl. For that reason, we use a side-handle pot to decant the tea into a bowl. The spirit of such sessions, however, is the same as if the leaves were in the bowl: simplicity, connection to Nature, etc. In the case of this month's tea, it can work directly in a bowl, but steeping it creates a different brew—less astringent and more bright. We like them both on different occasions.

Since we drink this month's tea directly from the bowl and poured from a side-handle pot both, this may be a good time to offer you another tip: choose the right tea and the right utensils for the right occasion. This month's tea, for example, would be great in the morning, as it is uplifting. You can choose to make it in a bowl or with a pot depending on what day it is, who your guests are, what the weather is like (directly in a bowl is nicer when it is cold out) and even based on whether you and your guests have eaten breakfast yet (leaves in the bowl are lighter/less intense). Maybe try both?

(There is a video up on our YouTube channel demonstrating side-handle pot tea. You can watch it at: <http://bit.ly/1hQROHp>)



Will O'Wisp