

A close-up photograph of several woven bamboo baskets filled with vibrant green tea leaves, likely wild red tea, arranged in a row. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture and color of the leaves.

Tea of the North

SPRING 2014 WILD RED TEA

QIAN JIA ZHAI, YUNNAN

This is by far the most special and treasured tea we've ever sent, and that's saying a lot! This month we've fulfilled a long-standing goal to make tea with our own hands to share with all of you, infusing the entire process from tree to bowl with the energy of this community! We hope that this marks the beginning of many more teas right from the source, bringing you a rich background to complement the amazing experience that is Global Tea Hut. As membership increases, we plan to devote some funds to traveling to tea-growing regions and finding farmers who produce tea organically, and who love the earth and wish to protect it the way that we do.

Drinking tea with this community each month is a profound experience, and we are always blown away by how different the tea is once it starts arriving at its destinations and we all start to drink it together. As so many of you have verified, you can really feel the community in the cup. This month will be extra special because we have such a magnificent story surrounding every bowl.

Sometimes people in the tea world get jaded, hearing so many stories used by vendors to sell tea. We know. After you go to a tea market in China and hear a few dozen wild claims about how the boss bought more tea than a region actually-factually produces, how they know him so well in such-and-such a village that he's family; or how his close relationship with some high government official allows him access to otherwise inaccessible tea—after all that, you start to tune out stories and rely solely on your own taste. Good teas don't need a story. They speak for themselves. “The truth is in the cup,” as Master Lin always says. Relying on your own taste when buying tea is great, but let's face it: a tea with a story is more enjoyable! Isn't that true for anything? Isn't your favorite piece of jewelry the one with a story? Isn't your favorite piece of decoration or artwork in your house the one you found on that special trip?

We believe that honest, heartfelt stories can enhance a tea and help connect us to the source. Since we aren't selling any teas, our trips to tea-growing regions will always be invested with a pure-hearted wish to deepen your relationship to tea and this community. We have three goals in mind: First, to inform you, so that you can learn about tea, tea regions, processing and history. Second, to make the drinking experience personal. This brings myth and emotion to each bowl, beyond what this beautiful community already brings to the tea table. Finally, we hope to promote organic farmers who grow in sustainable ways, connecting them to the world

and to each other, so that we can educate tea lovers about the effects their purchasing decisions have on the environment, as well as the effects you each have on the future of tea production...

Our Trip

This month, a group of thirteen Global Tea Hut members traveled to Yunnan in Southwest China, which is the birthplace of all tea and Cha Dao. This trip was the first of what we hope will be many activities designed to bring this community together in person. We hope to use our tea centers to create movement from this magazine, and the experience that surrounds receiving it, to actual tea spaces and then back home again. Receiving these envelopes always means more after you've visited our center and met the authors in person, seeing how your financial support is used. We hope to host a lot more tea trips in the coming years, as well as big gatherings at the new center after it's built!

The impetus for this trip actually began years ago... Wu De is always ready to learn anything tea related from anyone, and will humbly receive any teacher, whether in his lineage or not. Amongst many teachers he's studied tea with, he learned a lot from a Taiwanese tea master named Huang Chuan Fang. Some of you may recall that he even discussed Master Huang's calligraphy in his book *The Way of Tea*. Master Huang is a kind and gentle teacher, who has a way of conveying the spirit of tea simply and unadorned, so that people from all walks of life feel inspired to let Tea change their lives. He also has a vibrantly experimental streak, exploring new tea regions and testing new processing methodology. This sometimes creates amazing teas. In the mid 2000's, Master Huang began spending more and more time in Yunnan, eventually settling there and only returning to Taiwan on occasion.

In 2007, Master Huang began exploring more remote areas of Yunnan—literally getting off the beaten path. He began hiking up as yet unpaved roads to more remote villages that other tea connoisseurs weren't yet exploring, often uncovering amazingly clean and stunning teas. Around that time, Master Huang started visiting the village of Qian Jia Zhai in the Ai Lao mountain range. While there, he met the amazing Ai Li Juan, a tea lover and producer with the same verve for bright, clean and old-growth teas. He began producing small batches



of tea with her burgeoning company and the two formed a powerful business partnership. Around that time, Wu De met Ms. Ai at a tea expo in Malaysia where he was visiting his master. Her strong personality, friendliness and love for tea made Master Huang's flattering introduction unnecessary—the two were fast tea brother and sister. It also helped that her tea had more than an amazing liquor; it had an amazing story as well!

Years later, traveling by bus for more than ten hours from the capitol of Yunnan, Kunming, our group arrived at the Ai Lao Mountains late at night. The Ai Lao Mountain Range is huge, extending hundreds of square kilometers. (The Nature reserve alone is more than 500 square kilometers). The highest peak is over 3000 meters. The Ai Lao range is China's most vibrant evergreen forest, with vegetation covering more than eighty percent of the mountains, hundreds of species of plants and more than seventy kinds of large arboreal trees, including several varieties of *Camellia sinensis*. There are also vibrant ecologies of animals: everything from Bengal tigers and leopards to bears, rare birds, cobras and monkeys. Yunnan is a very lush and vibrant province, with fertile soil, mists and fog and crystalline waters that flow down from the Himalayas to the West. Ai Lao is mostly situated between the two most important of these "Nine Dragons," as the major rivers are called, the Lishi/Yuanjiang and the Lincang. There are eight traditional villages in Ai Lao with

Dian Hong

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 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").

seven tribes. They have all cooperated for as long as they can remember—most recently working together to build their own roads, electrical grid, water treatment facilities and schools.

Our destination was Qian Jia Zhai village, which literally means "Thousands of Families". It is located in Jiu Jia Township, Zhenyuan County in the heart of the Ai Lao range. There are around 16,000 people spread out over the Jiu Jia Township, most of them rural farmers. Up until recently, there were no roads to the village

and everything was carried in and out by donkey. The elder generations still tell stories of those days, reminding their children and grandchildren to not take their modern amenities for granted. There are 4,700 acres of tea forests here at an altitude of 2,000 to 2,500 meters. And these tea forests have a story that left Wu De standing agape when he first heard about them in 2007...

As Master Huang described the tea-growing situation there, Wu De's heart leapt, for it sounded as if it was one of the answers to all the environmental degradation happening in Yunnan in the name of tea—much of which had dampened many of Wu De's two dozen or so trips there. In fact, he has even cried for tea. Seeing trees that have been a part of a people's cultural heritage for centuries killed by unnecessary chemicals, like fertilizers, felt to him like someone spray-painting a Ming Dynasty painting. He remembered crying in the embrace of another of his teachers, Zhou Yu, and a reporter present asking another member of the group why the two were crying. The answer later overheard in the video was, "They just love tea." Being an optimist, though, Wu De was always on the look out for inspirational stories. Stories of hope. And he found it in Master Huang's description of Qian Jia Zhai.

The tea in Qian Jia Zhai is completely controlled by a co-op. There is little that any one individual can do to spoil the old-growth tea; its protected environment or any aspect of its processing without the other members of the group coming down on them. This means that personal greed cannot destroy what rightly belongs to no single human. Having lived for hundreds, if not thousands of years means these trees have a right to see future generations of people who *tend* to them rather than claim "ownership", passing them on to the next generation as healthy as they found them! When Wu De first heard about the co-op in Qian Jia Zhai, he developed an interest in visiting there, and kept an eye out for any and all tea from Ai Lao, tasting a lot along the way.

To continue our story, in 2010, Mr. Liang, a dear friend of our center, which many of you have met, came back from visiting Ms. Ai with a small batch of green Ai Lao *bings* (a *bing* is a discus of Puerh). This 2010 cake is amongst our all-time favorite teas. Many of you have tried it, or were even lucky enough to purchase a cake of it when it was still available. And, believe it or not, that very tea was the first ever Global Tea Hut tea of the month! (Be sure to go back to the first issue and read about it on our site!) Sharing that tea hundreds of times around the world ensured that one day we would take Ms. Ai up on her offer to visit her village and make some similar tea, which we finally did this May...

From the very start, Ai Li Juan made us feel like family, so much so that we came to know her as "Auntie Ai". She housed and fed us, guided us to see the tea trees and showered us with traditional songs and heartfelt smiles. She is an amazing, strong and modern woman: a single, tribal woman in rural China who controls an

international tea production company! She has been a member of the co-op in Qian Jia Zhai since 2005, tending to more than 400 hectares of tea. In 2012, Auntie Ai took all her savings from tea production and began construction on a tea processing and pressing facility that will include guest rooms for friends, as well as a museum and theater to preserve traditional Ku Chuong culture. She said that Master Huang's mentorship has been invaluable in the improvement of her Puerh processing, which she feels is getting better every year.

The Ku Chuong tribe has around 40,000 people with some heritage living throughout China and Laos. Until very recently, they were still living primitive lifestyles in the mountains of Ai Lao—completely self-sustained. In the last decade, they have moved down from the original village site, now part of the protected National Reserve, to settle in a small town below. They have paved roads leading to the capital and some modern amenities. The evidence of their traditional culture still abounds, however: in the gloriously colorful clothes of Ms. Ai and her old mother, as well as the way they cook and farm.

Auntie Ai told us that in the nineties, some farmers cut down a lot of the old tea trees to grow tobacco. Some of the elders then tore up the tobacco in protest of this. Our faces grew long, and a few of us looked down at the ground. "Cheer up," she said. "Those old tea trees are as strong as the mountain. They have deep and vast root systems. Even though many were cut down, after the land was returned to the National Reserve, many of the trees came back as though they'd never been cut!" And sure enough, she was right! The trees were strong and healthy again.

Tea of the Month *"Daughter of the Forest"*

Originally, we had planned to make Sheng Puerh to share with all of you. But the recent heavy rainfall made that impossible. We were resigned to buying some tea to share, each of the members traveling with us donating a portion, but Ms. Ai smiled and said, "Why not make some red tea instead?"

In Qian Jia Zhai, they call the red tea "Daughter of the Forest". We didn't have time to pick the tea ourselves, but we got to see the trees. The tea all came from trees that are two to seven hundred years old. 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 wasn't withered with such machines, but rather naturally withered, spread out on bamboo mats overnight. Making red tea is a simple process, and even though Yunnan is more famous nowadays for Puerh tea, it has always been a region of red tea as well, producing as much or more red tea as other regions for some decades. In fact, Puerh's rise to fame is rather recent, and in Yunnan there was more red tea by

Mia singing beautiful Native American songs while shaking this month's tea like an accompanying rattle



volume fifteen years ago. But our red tea isn't a plantation tea, since it was grown semi-wild in the forest.

The sun greeted us, beaming on our third day in the mountains, having shrugged off the rain for a while. After breakfast, Ms. Ai led us out to the back courtyard to make our red tea. The Ku Chuong of Ai Lao have a unique process for making red tea. After the twenty-hour withering (typical for most all red tea), we started by shaking the leaves, bruising the edges. This is usually a step only associated with oolong tea. We did this several times: shaking the tea, spreading it out, piling it, shaking... This helps further oxidize the tea, and the bruising opens the cells. We knew right away that this extra step would make our tea very unique. After the bruising/shaking, we began the rolling. You have to roll red tea for a long time, usually around ninety minutes. Because of the bruising, we only needed to continue rolling for around an hour. This shapes the tea and completely breaks down the cellular structure, releasing all the juices that will make the tea dark and red. It also helps to completely oxidize the tea (or as close to 100% as any tea can get). As we rolled and rolled, our L.A. friends sang some Native American chants. Hearing this, Auntie Ai smiled and burst into her own songs: a traditional Ku Chuong tea-picking song, a lament to the moon and our favorite, a song about how the arrival of distant friends can create memories that last a lifetime. These songs helped us infuse the tea with our love for all of you, as our hands were infused with tea oils for the rest of the day!

After the rolling, we put the tea in cloth bags and tightened them up into balls so the tea could ferment in its juices for another couple hours. The final stage was

to roast the tea dry, which Ms. Ai did for us in drying machines/roasters.

Of course, it would have been nice to have all our own teas and be able to taste the differences in each person's processing skills. But in the end, we decided to mix all the tea together. At first, Auntie Ai looked on in askance. She wondered what on earth we were doing. But after we explained that we were going to combine our love and share this tea with hundreds of people around the world, she was ecstatic! The next morning, there was extra tea waiting for us. Auntie Ai smiled, saying that it was tea she had made, as she wanted her energy to join ours. Everyone decided to donate some money and purchase a bit more from her, supporting her endeavors and adding more tea so that all of you could have a full tin!

We said some prayers over the tea and again when we got back to Taiwan and put it on the altar. We hope that all of you find in this tea health, happiness and fortune. It was made by our hands for you! We hope that you realize in drinking this tea just how much a part of our trip you all were—there in spirit throughout it all. You were on our minds and in our hearts. We mentioned you often, hoping that some of the wonders we were seeing came through in this issue of the magazine, and in the tea we made for you.

Try enjoying this tea in the morning in a bowl. Remember Auntie Ai's smile. She, too, wishes you all well. She said she is honored to the marrow that so many people around the world are enjoying her tea. "May it bring you the spirit of our ancient forests, for it is their daughter!" she exclaimed.



Brewing Tips for this Month's Tea (Brought to you by Mike Baas)

- Zen is doing one thing at a time. Make sure you are always doing one thing at a time.
- If you are just starting out on the Way of Tea and you don't have any equipment, remember that tea is just water and leaves.
- Setting up a "tea stage (chaxi)" can be helpful in creating a space for drinking tea. If you feel like you don't know how to create one, start by using whatever objects you happen to have around that have meaning to you. There are no rules for creating a chaxi. Also, read some of the wonderful articles in these magazines! Remember, a tea stage can be as simple as a piece of wood upon which to rest your bowl.
- Seek out a tea bowl with a base that will allow you to rest the bowl on your hand without feeling the intense heat of hot tea.
- Different teas require different temperatures, but a

good rule of thumb is to use water heated to just below a rolling boil.

- As you develop in tea, the need for additional equipment will become apparent. However, at first, start by drinking bowl tea: leaves placed directly inside the tea bowl with water poured directly onto them. ([See our YouTube video for a demonstration.](#))
- A good tea to start drinking at first is a red tea. This month's tea is a great choice, due to its large leaves and strong Qi (energy). This is a nice tea for the morning.
- When finished drinking tea, clean up before moving on to other activities.
- Attending a tea ceremony is an excellent way to develop your knowledge in tea. This helps keep your relationship to tea sacred and pure.
- If you feel the impulse to share tea with others, do not hesitate to do so!

