

茶在愛沙尼亞



TEA TIME IN ESTONIA

-Steve Kokker

In his ever-charming, witty style, Steve guides us through these past years of Tea spirit and community growing in Tallinn. Over the years, Wu De has visited three times, including a very recent return. Each time, more and more people have come out to support because the community there has done so much to foster Tea spirit between visits. Estonia is an amazing country, and much more so because the famous, funky and frolicky Steve Kokker peddles his tea and shares his great heart there.



After preparing for and then living through fifteen events, twelve days in two countries with Wu De, one does need a, shall we say, pause... The two of us shared a heartfelt fare-thee-well at Tallinn's cheek-pinchingly cute airport, both of our heads and hearts reeling partly from sleep deprivation and socialization overload, but mainly from as-yet undigested memories of endless dozens of beautiful moments of human connection. As an antidote to the round-the-clock schedule of the past few weeks, I then did something quintessentially Estonian: I headed straight to a bog. With tea added to the mix, I lived out what to me has come to mean 'Tea in Estonia': preparing tea, alone, in a bog.

For most (Western, urban, if I may be so presumptuous) readers of this magazine, the word "bog", if it brings anything to mind at all (perhaps as much as "deciduous vegetation", "liquefaction", or "glacial till" might) likely reminds one of the word 'swamp', which doesn't exactly kindle the flames of a Western heart. At best, it might trigger some associations with scary-in-childhood fairy tales: moss-dripping, tree-like creatures creeping around slimy elf- and warlock-infested landscapes where monsters rise from dark pools of oil-like water and where few are heard from again.

I want to say that nothing could be further from the truth. However, a number of my Estonian friends also seem to share this vision of

bogs, perhaps having been fed since childhood stories about bottomless lakes full of witches emerging at night to dance and pull unsuspecting trespassers down into their murky depths with them. I have yet to find many locals who are as enthusiastic about skinny dipping in these dark bog lakes as I (even adults will shirk away from such an invite, muttering something about the cold temperature or just not being in the mood right then and there, but likely being swayed by childhood tales spun by parents themselves similarly terrified in their childhood).

But I digress, yet again...

Tea in Estonia, then, for me personally, goes something like this: the slam of a dusty car trunk



announces the start of a trek, backpack full of tea equipment, through mosquito and blueberry-infested woods. Mainly pine and fir. Eventually, thick tree roots emerging from the ground give way to softer, grassy soil, and the bushes and trees get smaller and smaller. Then, a wooden walking trail appears. Pixar-designed dragonflies appear before you and announce the beginning of the bog—and the end of annoying flies. For bogs are dragonfly and butterfly kingdoms; mosquitoes and horseflies simply do not have the *magic quotient* to be allowed entry.

Step off the wooden trail and be prepared to either sink knee-deep or get your feet soaked in a sponge-like thick layer of golds and greens, browns and yellows. This mossy

substrate is home to insect eating plants by summer and by autumn, cranberries (those delicious wonders John Oliver recently, nastily referred to as tasting “like cherries that hate you!”). Keep walking and you will pass those darkened pools some locals say they are even scared to look at for too long, and soon find some place to park your tail to set up for tea.

The hours you spend drinking tea there, as I did today, will pass in a vortex of sorts, as time stops to exist and linear experience vanishes the moment the dragonflies appear. And if you pick a powerful tea, like the 1970s Liu Bao I prepared today, be ready for a transformative experience. Ducks and geese might fly overhead, momentarily obscuring

those suspicious con trails, and the eerie sounds of wind sweeping its way through distant clusters of trees will compete with the roiling water. *Just keep going... Just keep floating...*

The sounds are few here, and the stillness has a downward pull to it. Bogs are deep. The energy feels recharging, just what is needed after fifteen workshops in twelve days! For while Solo Bog Tea might be my version of ‘Tea in Estonia’, there is a slightly different definition extant in the bubble surrounding Wu De’s visit here, before and long after...

Yet somehow bogs do relate to the series of events held in Tallinn and Helsinki in August and September. Perhaps not directly, but energetically. See, Estonians bring to the table a readiness to connect deeply

that for many others would require a lot of work to get at. There are fewer layers here of self-protective wrapping, of clinging to material aspects of life to define one's existence. So the more spiritual lessons in our kind of Tea practice absorb quicker than I've seen elsewhere. Of course, I may be romanticizing some, and there are plenty of exceptions to this sweet rule, but in general, people are quite willing to slip into a meditative space here, which makes Wu De's words and presence all the more compelling.

Estonians are not the folks you would gather to have a lively discussion full of questions, shared personal opinions and intellectual, analytical banter. Yet if you wish for a deeper experiencing of emotional, spiritual issues, for them to be absorbed like water into the golden red spongy moss of the bogs, then this is the place. During this visit, Wu De's talks were a mix of Heaven (Tea as a way of spiritual cultivation) and Earth (how to brew Wuyi oolongs), and the people gathered seemed present, alert and appreciative.

The tea culture in Estonia has changed so radically since the time I started my small importing business in 2004, and even from the time Wu De first visited in 2012. It often makes my head shake in a rather foolish-looking and dopey display to consider the enthusiastic readiness with which people have embraced Tea over the last few years.

When I began this project, several people said, "Don't waste your time—Estonia is a coffee country. You won't make any money and people won't be interested in tea culture." Turns out they were partially wrong: while making money in Estonia still often appears a Herculean endeavor requiring morally shaky shrewdness, the interest in tea both as a healthier beverage alternative to coffee and as a meditative practice has been heart-stirring and

head-spinning. Most importantly, we now have a tea community here of helpful angels who independently make tea 'happen' in Estonia; they are the heart and soul of what Tea has become in Estonia.

When Wu De first visited, we were worried about finding enough people to fill the workshops; this time, we were more concerned about how to accommodate everyone! More and more people come to these sessions, as well as to our weekly tea gatherings, to find a space where powerful teas are served in an atmosphere conducive to feeling before thinking, to for once prioritizing life's most important aspects over the daily grinds which often convince one of all-importance, and to opening deep pathways of connection to the heart.

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Of course, we all write similar words about heart space on these pages month after month; they might run the risk of sounding trite, contrived. And what a shame that would be as living more 'through the heart' is what can save us all from a lot of suffering! Beyond any nice words I could attempt to conjure here, it is the expression on the faces of the participants of these tea sessions which speak volumes.

I recall one evening in particular, a Saturday evening tea session which ended as softly as if a snippet of silk had landed onto a plush carpet: After a few hours of silence, Five Element Tea and Wu De channeling other-level wisdom, all the

participants remained sitting on the floor, staring at the floor. It almost always happens that people don't want a tea session to end, but this time was special. Even after Wu and I stood up and left the front of the room, after I turned music on, and even started cleaning up, people remained, transfixed, neither here nor there. For about fifteen minutes! Only slowly, eventually, did people muster the strength to push themselves up and back into linear time. Pure magic! I think I shall always remember the looks on their faces. I was deeply touched; if any note of disturbance was in my heart then, it was thinking of dear, beloved friends who happened to not be there that evening.

For me personally, what I appreciate most about Wu De's visits, aside from college-like moments in my flat, moments of Goof Bliss and hearing my name being chirped out as "Stiff!" every few minutes, and yet *not* counting the prerequisite visit to *Pizza Americano* (which I will be digesting through Christmas), is what these visits do to the people I love most in their aftermath. Wu De's enthusiasm, solid and focused presence and overflowing love of Tea encourages the same in others. After he leaves, the people in our tea group feel like their commitment is sharpened, that the reasons for following a Tea path are clearer and that the sheer desire to do unto others as was done to them grows naturally from the heart.

One more sip then of this Liu Bao, offered up symbolically to this blue-green imitation of a mini helicopter buzzing in front of my face; one last in-breath of bog-filtered air, as I am filled with the one predominant feeling after this latest series of workshops: *Gratitude*.



