

泡碗茶和功夫茶

SERVING BOWL TEA & GONGFU TEA

茶人: Estonian Tea Community,
led by Steve Kokker

Steve asked the whole Estonian tea community to share their experiences serving bowl tea versus gongfu tea at public gatherings. They all then realized they didn't serve enough gongfu tea and spent a month doing so. What they have to say about the two brewing methods provides insight into understanding these methods as service. In this tradition, we don't learn how to make tea, but to serve it!

As a group, we here in Estonia host tea gatherings every Friday, with a different person serving each week. Almost exclusively, we serve side-handle pot tea. The reasons are several: it's the most convenient for groups of eight to ten, in terms of both volume of tea made per steeping as well as the ability to serve this number of people comfortably without engaging in acrobatics; it doesn't call so much attention to itself as to take away our emphasis on a relaxing atmosphere conducive to inner flights; and finally, it is our habit to do so. While the first two reasons are demonstrably logical and practical, likely the main reason we serve in this way 90 percent of the time is the third: *habit*. It's what drives most of our actions, after all.

We have been to some degree letting our gongfu practice slip. We've all become quite comfortable (in ways we might not have previously

imagined!) with serving groups of people from side-handle pots (or sometimes making boiled, or bowl tea), and finding the motivation to practice gongfu skills at home can sometimes be challenging. It's easy to fall into *wrongfu*, or some variation of gongfu that doesn't go quite all the way. For example, preparing tea in a small yixing and pouring into small cups but maybe not showering all the time, or maybe slowing down the pace for some reason, feeling the coordinated flow of temperature control slip away like rising steam... Sure, there's respect toward the tea, it tastes and feels great, and all the right equipment is there... but it still isn't really gongfu.

And yet, we are in this tea life for the long run, which is why we decided to up the ante for ourselves and make April our gongfu month. Our dear Herkko had an eye-opening experience serving gongfu style

recently and proposed that we all make a concerted effort to do this in public more often; out of that was born an Estonian-style thirty-day challenge. Without the gentle nudges or even welcome pushes of caring friends, we might all be standing several steps behind our current positions. As we ready ourselves to step up to the serving trays, then, I thought it might be a sweet idea for us to offer our thoughts about gongfu style serving versus other styles.

Here are a few voices from our community, musings about the differences between serving gongfu style and offering side-handle or bowl tea service. As a group we speak more clearly than as individuals.





荼 If I had to sum up the different characteristics of serving tea with a side-handle pot and serving gongfu, I'd use the words *mystery* and *mastery*. Not long ago, I gained a direct, personal sense of the contrast between these two at a public tea gathering of our tea community, *Teeline*, where, instead of using the customary side-handle pot, I decided to prepare tea gongfu as best I could. It turned out to be one of the deepest personal lesson I've learned about serving tea.

A true side-handle pot always feels deeply shamanistic. Paired with larger bowls, serving with a side-handle to a larger group has always felt to me like a shamanistic ritual. Bowl by bowl, people take off to unknown lands and I myself find some space between servings to focus also on my inner journey. There is always a true *mystery* up in the air. I tend to feel that at least in my tea servings with a side-handle pot, it is more about taking people to different states of consciousness and being, with tea as a humble guide through this journey.

When I did my first public gongfu tea gathering, I was instantly astonished at how different the frequency of serving is. It was not about mysterious insights anymore, but about really *getting the tea done*. All the movements and guidelines built up a fast tempo for my mind

and I didn't find any time for my personal meditations. My only question at the end was: is this rushing really the *mastery* of gongfu?

Having of course done many gongfu sessions by myself or with two to three friends, it strangely never felt so different from side-handle pot sessions. But a public gathering instantly put the serving skills into a new light. For the first time, I really asked if I am capable. Do I know how it works? In gongfu, there is a clear set of parameters and a certain framework for brewing, so I also have to focus my mind to follow them and it feels like there is no time for any mysterious insight. I then had a light of intuition switch on, and realized that the real *mastery* behind gongfu is meditation, while at the same time also serving a fine cup of tea.

Herkko Lab





茶 There is much more “happening” in gongfu tea—more activity for the curious brain to catch hold of. *What is that utensil? Why such particular motions?* These are just a few of the common questions one is likely to hear. While the questions may be good, the questioning mind is often unlikely to be satisfied by an answer. I personally am thus more likely to prepare tea gongfu for a smaller group, with people I know and with whom I have drunk tea previously. Even then, sometimes when people are fidgety and restless, I’d prefer to prepare bowl tea. Gongfu tea indeed demands concentration for bringing out the most from the leaves, and to experience the tea fully—from both parties, the host and guest alike. While it is true that, in most cases, concentration develops naturally over the course of a tea session, I’d rather not see tea drinking as a means to an end. For me, some days can simply be off—perhaps it was from going to bed too late, eating unhealthy food or from a nagging worry or whatnot. But on such days as that, I’d rather leave all the precious wares aside and enjoy a simply prepared bowl of tea.

Timo Einpaul

茶 When it comes to comparing bowl tea and gongfu tea, the difference can be and had better be very distinct. Bowl tea is more like a hermit monk with his few things and modest way of living. He is serving others with his simple actions. And those actions really depend on the current situation that he is a part of. Nothing goes wrong because he can’t do everything as he wants. But all he does is a teaching. At the same time, gongfu tea is more like an artist with a lot of skill in his field. He serves others with his talent, which he has honed to mastery. While the monk is mainly teaching with his peace and simplicity, the artist uses a rather exact or even pointed way to share his heart. Of course, they have a lot to study from each other, because the monk is relaxing in the beginning while the artist is searching along never-ending trails to mediate the Divine. How are those heights different from the beginning place he left behind? Can he also rest in the same place where the monk is?

Hanno Padar

tee As I sit here, sipping a nice cup of “baobao cha,” I am quietly wondering about tea and the many ways of making it...

Well, at times, I feel that bowl tea is like a sunny and peaceful day, or warming like a song around a campfire; it often feels alone by the lake or with a few friends near the river. All is easy, all is carefree. It’s about simplicity, about enjoying the moment, about being thankful. It also offers a chance for deep talks with a friend or looking deeply into your own soul.

Making tea in a side-handle pot is convenient and functional. It offers a friendly feeling of confidence, which is very important in the beginning. It’s about celebrating a circle of friends and a chance to drink life-giving tea by creating a sparkling and magical atmosphere.

Gongfu tea, on other hand, is almost like trying to create music: a trial to compose a beautiful symphony where all the instruments play in harmony. It takes a lot of patience and profound wisdom to be a good composer, a lifetime’s worth. You have to hear the music, hear the whispers of the water and the sounds of the fire, feel the clay, and most importantly, hear what the leaves are telling you. Only when you “love every note, every tone,” like Estonia’s national treasure, and one of the world’s greatest living composers, Arvo Pärt, our fellow tea brother, says, can you “create music that speaks!” Only then can you be peaceful, free and happy. Therefore, only when all of your movements come from the center of your heart can you make tea that makes another heart sing!

After many years of drinking and serving tea in these various styles, I am so thankful that there are so many ways to brew, and therefore endless possibilities for learning and growing!

Triin Juurik



tee I love spending time in the forest. I leave early in the morning so I can be in the midst of this beautiful land, light and soundscape all through the day. My go-kit for these journeys is always a bowl and leaves. I look for a spring so I can be a part of the same water feeding the trees and flowers, birds and animals. I sit down for a quiet moment (as much as possible while surrounded by the gorgeous polyphony of this amazing orchestra of Mother Nature) and let myself be taken on a journey. I sit with a smile on my face, light steam arising from the bowl in my hands, and I look at the beautiful leaves dancing in the water, becoming this gorgeous elixir of life. I am mesmerized by this beautiful choreography in my bowl and around me. I am humble and grateful. As I finish the last sip, I open my eyes and continue my journey—full of love and life.

I’ve been serving tea for a bit more than a year now. When serving tea gongfu or in a side-handle pot, there is always this one beautiful moment, which I sometimes wish would last forever. As I have poured the last drop into the bowl in front of me, I put the pot down and then... I do not pause or stop, but emotionally I take a step back to expand the moment and feeling by seeing this beautiful setting of bowls, tea and steam. I take a calm and light in-breath to savor the moment, and with the next out-breath I hand out the bowls with gratitude to be able to serve this tea. And as I collect the bowls again, I smile for the little circle of life in front of me. All finished in one breath. I find that the same energy is awakened in serving tea, bowl or cup, gongfu or sidehandle—all leaves and Nature

Loore Martma

