

# ORGANIC OOLONGS

If you have followed us thus far on our journey through Taiwanese oolong tea, you are starting to get the lay of the land—at least as we see it. Of course, any attempt to explore such a vast topic as Taiwanese oolong tea must make editorial decisions. There are a tremendous number of perspectives we could cover, from linear information to history and from processing to individuals who are important in Taiwanese tea culture. When we started producing this issue, we weren't sure where this would lead. Like you, we started with a bit of wandering so that we could find the structure in the maps we're making, which is why we chose to have these map-like sections

in the issue (with Guanyin watching over the seas we travel).

As we began down this road, we knew that we wanted to introduce the general background of Taiwan, its rich tea heritage, the varieties and kinds of oolongs and where they are produced. As we explored those basics, the same themes started surfacing in our own understanding of Taiwanese oolong, the discussions we had with tea masters as well as in exploring the history of this magical tea. You may have already noticed the two leitmotifs woven throughout our journey so far: environmental sustainability and the loss of / nostalgia for / revival of traditional processing methods.

Modern innovation and a movement towards lighter, greener oolong production has indeed resulted in some amazing, bright and delicious new teas—teas that we love and drink often at the Center. We hope that you don't find this whole Extended Edition to be antagonistic to such tea. However, there is a real magic in traditionally processed oolong tea. Remember, oolong processing didn't change much for hundreds of years (other than the evolution that occurred in response to new varieties and the small adaptations that happen each season due to the weather

and rainfall). While lightly-oxidized oolongs can indeed be fragrant, floral and a tremendous joy to drink, they often lack the body of traditionally processed tea, are less ageable and therefore need to be consumed more quickly (while fresh), require more packing and were primarily created and encouraged by an expanding tea market that needed mass-produced tea. Such tea was invented and driven in large part by quantity, not quality.

The point of discussing this issue is not to be too harsh on modern farmers or on lightly oxidized oolong. We don't want to hurt Her feelings. But there is a growing nostalgia for traditionally processed oolong tea in Taiwan that is creating many new and amazing innovations, as well as resurrecting some very amazing old teas. Traditional processing, with more oxidation and roast, is growing. The more awareness there is surrounding this issue, the more we can move towards a market that offers us the choice of light, green, dark, full-bodied or even aged oolong. The other important reason to raise awareness concerning traditional processing relates to the other theme of this issue: environmental sustainability.

As Mr. Tsai said in the article on the Tea of the Month, sometimes we



# OF THE NORTH

have to choose between fragrance and sustainability. This depends on the location and varietal, of course, but it is often true that producing lighter, greener oolong means that insects must not bite the leaves, which would cause unwanted oxidation. One solution to this, of course, is to use natural pest deterrents, like essential oils, predators, etc., but that requires more effort and expense on the part of the farmer. The average cash-crop tea farmer won't be willing to do that. Lighter, greener oolong also introduces more machinery and packaging to maintain freshness and promotes increased consumption, since you feel pressured to drink the tea sooner rather than later. Traditional processing suits bug-bitten leaves—of course it does; it started before the invention of pesticides. It can also be stored as long as you like, and in simple packaging like our Tea of the Month. And more important than purchasing organic, or even living tea, the best thing a tea lover can do for the environment is to consume less. When we drink a lightly oxidized oolong, we are rarely satisfied (although there are exceptions). It often is like having an appetizer, and we quickly move on to other teas afterwards. That, coupled with a desire to drink it fresh, means

we have more than we need, or even want to.

We always make a strong effort to overwhelm any discussion of the problems in the tea world, environmental or otherwise, with solutions. We believe that change happens through inclusion, through example—through the heart! We wanted to save some space, therefore, for some of the brighter examples of proper tea farming in Taiwan that we have covered over the years, echoing their stories forward because those who care for the earth matter. We decided to stick to the northern part of the island since we have limited space (even in an extended issue), and because the north has had a greater concentration of environmentally-conscious and sustainable farmers, and for longer. There is a shift happening in the central highlands—one we hope continues. But that will have to be a different story for another issue of Global Tea Hut.

Onward, then, through a journey of some of the brightest farms and tea masters in Taiwan. Most of these were published before any of you were members—back in the days when this was just a newsletter with a few dozen readers. Their stories are worth renewing, though. In Sanskrit, the word

for wisdom is “*prajna*.” “*Pra*” means “before” and “*na*” is “knowledge,” so wisdom is that which is before knowledge, or the “beginner’s mind,” as it is often translated in Zen. We try to avoid saying “repeat” here at the Center and focus on “renew” instead. That way, there is always more to learn, greater skill to master and new mountains of tea to explore!

Some of you will be meeting these tea masters for the first time and others of you once more. Either way, let us learn from them: their approach, method and, of course, their tea. Deep bows to Masters Yu San He, (余三和) Gu Shen Chien (古乘乾) and Gao Ding Shi (高定石).