

TEA OF THE MONTH

It's that time of the year again: the return of the classic Sun Moon Lake red tea we've come to call "Elevation," the only tea we repeat every year. The tea for this month is our all-time favorite tea, and the one we send home with travelers who stop at our Center! You could say it's our signature tea: the one we use to introduce new teawayfarers to the path—the first wayside sign of the road. It's also one of the teas we like to serve when we set up our roadside huts, serving tea to passersby. This month is always a good opportunity to review some of the core teachings we have around tea, like understanding living tea and the difference between red and black tea. Also, by retelling Mr. Shu's story we learn the importance that the dialogue between the farmer and trees has on the quality of a tea.

This amazing red tea is worthy of being called a "living tea," in all the ways we have discussed in previous issues: It is seed-propagated, the trees have space to grow, there is a living relationship with the local ecology—undergrowth, plants, insects, animals, molds and bacteria. There are, of course, no chemicals used in its production and no irrigation either. There's also a positive dialogue/

relationship with the farmer. It shines with a bright and uplifting energy that makes it the perfect morning tea, radiating your day and filling it with "elevation." It is simple and true, and you feel like you know it after your first bowl, as if a beloved friend from another lifetime has come back into your life.

Though the trees are allowed room to grow between trees, they are pruned. This is usually a disqualifier for what we call "living tea," but we always give Elevation a pass. The reason the trees are pruned is that the whole farm is tended by just one farmer and his wife. If Mr. Shu and his wife let the trees grow up, which they would like to, they would be unable to harvest all the leaves in the time window Nature and the weather allow for picking. And they cannot afford to hire help for the harvest. Most farmers prune their trees in the autumn to increase yield, but Mr. Shu does so out of practical need. We think that this exception is very minor compared to most tea in the world, and therefore Mr. Shu's tea still qualifies as a "living tea."

As you may remember, there are two main varieties of tea: small leaf and large leaf. Originally, all tea comes

from the forests in and around southwest China: Yunnan, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and eastern India. The descendants of those original trees are single-trunked, with large, wide crowns that can grow several meters in height. The roots are also deep, extending far down into the earth before branching. Then, as tea traveled north and east—naturally or by human hands—it adapted to colder, sometimes higher, climates and terrain. These trees, called "small leaf," developed into several trunks, like a bush, with roots that extend outwards rather than down. The leaves got smaller and smaller as tea progressed north into colder climes, until they became so small in places like Japan that when they are rolled, they look like little needles (like *sencha* or *gyokuro*). Our Tea of the Month is a large-leaf varietal, like puerh.

Since Elevation is from large leaf trees grown at a lower altitude, it is more bitter and astringent since the leaves grow faster and don't store as much glucose to make them sweet. However, this rapid growth channels more from the mountain, lending the tea a stronger Qi. Much like puerh, Elevation is also a great candidate for aging long-term.



Elevation



Sun Moon Lake, Taiwan



2016 Old-Growth Red Tea



Taiwanese



~800 Meters

*Check out the Tea of
the Month video to
learn more!*



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Living Tea

“Living tea” is a translation of the Chinese “zhen cha (真茶),” which literally translates to “real tea.” But translating it that way doesn’t capture the essence or poetry of the words, as the English “real” also often refers to something that isn’t a fake, as in “authentic,” but the Chinese is pointing to tea that is natural. In the first ever English description of puerh, which was printed on a large trademark ticket, called a “da piao (大票),” which would have been printed and set either one per tong (筒, seven cakes wrapped in bamboo), or one ticket per jian (斤, 12 tongs, or 84 cakes), we find the following advertising about the their tea leaves: “Those made by human labor cannot compare to them.” Though this is really just part of a 1930s advertisement for a puerh company (Tong Qing Hao, 同慶號), it still captures what we mean when we say “living tea.” We mean that it is beyond comparison to that made by the hands of man. “Living” means thrumming with Qi; it means full of Nature, created by the mountain, wind and rain.

1) Seed-propagation

This is essential, as tea is a sexual plant and the lifeforce of a tree is dependent upon its natural propagation. Natural trees live for centuries, or even millennia, while cuttings, which make up most tea plantations on Earth, only live for decades.

2) Room to grow

All beings need healthy space to grow. Plants growing in harmony with their environment will organize themselves, and never in rows. Also, letting the trees grow up means they also grow deeper roots.

3) Biodiversity

A tree is its environment. The terroir defines the tea. Plants are open and porous, absorbing minerals and rain, sunshine and moonshine. The soil and climate become the leaf. Nothing is more important to a tea’s quality than the myriad natural relationships that create a tea.

4) No agrochemicals

Pesticides, weed-killers and chemical fertilizers are all unsustainable, making the tea trees dependent on products pro-

duced outside their natural ecology. They are also unhealthy for the water table, the farmers and their families, and for us, the consumers.

5) No irrigation

A farmer can increase yield by irrigating, and this is often necessary even for organic plantation tea. But in a natural, “living” setting, irrigation weakens the trees. Without irrigation, fewer trees will survive but those that do will have deeper roots and be stronger and healthier, drinking deep, underground, mineral-rich mountain water.

6) Dialogue with the farmer

The character for tea is a combination of the radicals for “herb,” “wood” and “human.” The quality of tea is in a very real way a conversation between the farmer and Nature. The motivations of the farmer, and whether the relationship is one of respect and honor or not, will determine the resulting leaves. And that is before we even account for the processing skills required to make fine tea! Fine tea is a balance of Human, Earth and Heaven.



From Past to Present

When the Japanese conquered Taiwan, they wanted to develop several long-term agricultural projects to help their economy. They brought many large-leaf trees and saplings, as well as seeds, from eastern India to make red tea plantations, choosing Sun Moon Lake for its accessibility and because its terroir is similar to that of the original homes of these trees. Soon after, the Japanese were expelled and their gardens were abandoned. In the coming decades, these semi-wild gardens would grow up and produce completely wild offspring, as well as adapting and relating to the local terroir in all the amazing ways a tea tree can—through the soil, the insects, rain and minerals, sun and rock. Our tea comes from one such small organic

and ecological garden consisting primarily of semi-wild trees with some wild ones scattered about.

The farmer, Mr. Shu, is an amazing man. Many of his nearby neighbors have utilized their gardens to create more industrial plantations and get rich. He says he only wants enough to provide for his family, and therefore keeps it simple and organic. He has even bought up some nearby property so that he can control the proximity his trees have to anything harmful others may be using. For that reason, the tea is incredibly clean and bright, speaking of its long heritage here in these mountains and beyond, to the older forests its ancestors once lived in at the foot of the great Himalayas.

Mr. Shu is a second-generation farmer with an incredible attitude.

While his neighbors constructed new-and-improved houses with satellite dishes, he stayed humble, simple and in love with his work and trees. Three years ago, there was a drought and a plague of bugs decimated the area—insects that come only every decade or so. When we talked to him about it, he responded with great wisdom, proving that—like the ancient Daoist texts—even the simplest people can achieve harmony with the Dao, mastery of life and a great wisdom that we all can learn from. He said that at that time, he received less. If he were to stress about that, or worse yet, compromise his values and turn to pesticides for help, it would be like rejecting his destiny, arguing with Heaven. Furthermore, he said that it would show how ungrateful he was for what Nature *had* given him. “We should

茶 *Mr. Shu and Wu at the farm we love.*



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be grateful for what Nature provides and accept the times that Heaven takes from us—learning from times of having less, or even losing what we have, as much as in times of abundance. We all will face lack and loss sooner or later. If you resist and argue with Heaven that your destiny is unfair, you don't learn and there will be greater misfortune later. Better to accept whatever Nature gives us and be grateful for it. I have less this year, but it is okay because I saved when I had more last year; and maybe next year I will have more again." There couldn't be deeper life lessons than these!

Some of you know from last year's video that we have made a commitment to buy any tea that Mr. Shu does not sell each year at Chinese New Year for the rest of our lives.

When we told him this, he actually cried and said that in doing so, we were freeing him to focus on tea farming and production, rather than on marketing, which he admitted he is not very good at doing. We cannot ask farmers to protect the environment without caring for them and their families. When farmers are honored and respected, socially and economically, then we can begin dialogue about how we would like them to steward the land in their care. As long as they face economic hardship and are ignored/disrespected, they will make compromises. There are many ways to get involved in the ongoing shift to sustainable tea production, but working with the farmers in ways like this is paramount.

We wanted you to know that this month's tea is one of the ways that

Global Tea Hut is working hard to make a difference, even if it is small. We hope that Mr. Shu will become a shining example to his neighbors and peers, who will see that he sells out all of his tea, every year—year after year—and maybe ask him why. When he says that a global community of tea lovers around the world is buying him out precisely because he loves Nature and is farming organically, they may reconsider how they care for their land. Buying all of Mr. Shu's leftover tea this year is what has afforded us the surplus to send out an extra tin to each of you, so that you too can know what it feels like to share this most-beloved tea with someone and start his or her tea journey. We told Mr. Shu we'd be doing this and he said he hopes everyone who drinks it shares it and is happy!

Red vs. Black Tea

Once again, we are committed to correcting the red tea/black tea mistake. It is important to understand that what most Westerners call "black tea" is actually "red tea." Ordinarily, it doesn't matter what something is called, but in this case there is another kind of Chinese tea that is called "black tea." So if you call red tea "black tea," then what do you call black tea?

The reasons for this mistake are manifold, having to do with the long distances the tea traveled in chests to Europe, and even more importantly with the general lack of information there for the first few hundred years tea was traded. Another layer to the confusion comes from the fact that the Chinese have always categorized tea based on the liquor, while Westerners named tea for the color the leaf itself. The difference between black and red tea is much more obvious in the liquor than in the leaf, though the leaf is also slightly red to our eyes. Europeans weren't allowed inland in those days, and never saw the tea trees or the processing either (except some roasting). Buying through middlemen in broken pidgin English, you could see how easy it would be

to spread misinformation. We repeat this every time we send a red tea, because it is an important mistake that we tea lovers have to correct in the world, so that the real black tea can have its name back!

The basic difference between red and black tea is that red tea is heavily oxidized through prolonged withering and rolling during production and black tea is artificially fermented post-production. This usually happens through piling, which is akin to composting. Local bacteria are important in the post-production artificial fermentation of black tea, which means that it is a very regional kind of tea—its terroir includes the micro-environment, along with the trees, soil, weather, etc. Red tea, on the other hand, is the only genre of tea that is truly a production methodology, which can therefore be applied to *any* varietal/cultivar.

Nowadays the term "dark tea" is used by some tea vendors and authors to describe black tea, rather than correcting the mistake. However, we still feel that when a culture misappropriates or mistakenly terms a concept, category or idea from another culture then it is the foreign culture's respon-

sibility to correct the mistake, which demonstrates a respect and honor for the "host." Honoring the proper Chinese terminology is honoring the farmers and tea masters that have handed the genetic lineage of trees, the brewing methodologies and the spiritual practices down to us. We are not trying to correct the mainstream habit of saying "black tea." What we are doing is correcting this mistake amongst those who care—amongst our community of more conscious, heart-centered Chajin, allowing all of you to better communicate with those who produce and sell tea at its source.

The issue is, ultimately, a minor one, but here's an example of the effect honoring tradition and correcting this mistake can have: Last month, we met with two farmers from Liu Bao, in Guangxi, and they were so happy with our efforts to honor and respect true "black tea," returning it to its proper place in the West, that they broke out a celebratory fifty-year-old Liu Bao tea and congratulated us again and again, cup after cup! And their gratitude was definitely sincere, as was our respect for black tea producers.

Elevation

This month, instead of sharing what our guests felt about this special tea, we asked some of the community to drink it and write some poems to share with us all.

茶 *The brightest lake
Full of the sun and moon
Lifted skyward
And drunk down in one gulp.
-Wu De*

茶 *Pinkish red to amber golden
Dawn of sunrise lifting
Mimicking reflection in my bowl
Colors and wavelengths shifting
Golden ring along the outside border
Reddish-orange centers this medicinal water
Each brew a furthering shade of the rising sun
You call this Elevation?
As I sit... I understand where you're coming from.
-Antonio Moreno*

茶 *High, high above the lake,
Through the lush, lush forest,
Past the bamboo grove,
Past endless vines,
Over moss-covered rocks,
I reach the peak of the hill.
Came here to enjoy the view of Sun Moon Lake,
But the trees seemed to have gathered here as well.
Only green, and beyond that mist.
The lake remains hidden by the clouds.
Elevated from the World of Dust,
I sit down amongst the trees,
And decide to enjoy the view of the world within.
Not a single ripple can be seen on the surface of my mind.
The reality of mind and matter unfold naturally.
-Jasper Hermans*



*Check out the video
on brewing tips now!*

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Brewing Tips

We recommend putting these leaves in a bowl and watching them unfold in the oldest brewing method around—older than the pyramids in fact! Elevation is the ultimate bowl tea! It often defines this brewing style, as so many of us started our tea journeys drinking this very tea in this very way. It is a great morning tea, leaving you awake, bright and calm. Try waking up a bit earlier one morning, alone or with some loved ones. Put more or less leaves in your bowl, to your taste, and fill it with hot water. As it steeps, have a moment or two of meditation. Then pass the bowl between you, sharing a single bowl as you share a single encounter, a single chance...

This is an amazing tea to have in the morning. Try sitting cross-legged and putting a few leaves in a bowl. Sit and soak up the warmth and feel how it invigorates you. It has an amazing energy that calms and uplifts simultaneously. Try this for a few days and you will find that your outlook each morning is getting brighter and your life is starting to change—and all from a few leaves scattered in a bowl...