

FRIENDS FROM THE FIRST BOWL BY HERKKO LABI

I feel really elevated to say that for me, the journey with tea as a medicine for the soul started with the magical leaves of Sun Moon Lake red tea in a simple bowl. It was 2012: A freezing autumn in Tallinn and Wu De came here to Estonia for the first time (walking around in pair of summer sandals). I think he didn't understand the climate of Estonia. I did not know anything about Cha Dao, or that it would change my life forever. Back then, most of Estonia was living on low-quality tea bags in huge mugs, warming us up in this freezing weather. Tea was just another hot drink—mostly seen a bad substitute for coffee. I can't blame Estonians, though. Our beloved tea shop, Chado, had just been open for a year and there wasn't much fine tea around. You don't have to be an expert to understand that there is something strange in the taste and effect of a tea bag drowned in a mug for too long. And who could have known that in just four years this tea community in Estonia would change so drastically? From a small gathering organized by Chado/Steve we've grown into a thriving tea community. I am still amazed that our local tea hero Steve had a hard time filling Wu De's first workshops in Estonia. Last year, it was hard to find space for everyone! I am more than certain that Elevation played an important role in all this.

When Wu De's first workshops in Estonia ended, Steve and Triin had prepared a gift for every participant: a simple bowl and a cute bag of Sun Moon Lake red tea with some instructions inside. I remember Wu De talking a lot about how to start your tea journey: "Take a small bowl, put some leaves inside it and drink it every day in silence. Do that for one week and see what happens!" A bowl! Not a yellow mug with some boring logo? Leaves? Isn't tea mostly black powder? And drinking in silence? Why? And did he really promise that this practice would change our entire lives—not just our attitude towards tea, but also our understanding of ourselves as living beings? Despite such thoughts, I considered that I had just drunk really good tea for the first time in my life and that it was served

by a tea master, so I felt that it was worth trying. Every morning, I tried this new ritual of silence and bowl tea. And, surprise-surprise, this strange, funny and funny-bearded American from Taiwan was right: it worked as he'd promised! I suddenly felt a whole new state of being opening up for me during these silent sessions. And that state was accompanied with the sentiment of meeting a friend I'd lost long ago. Her plan this time was to stay with me a little longer. I was happy! Transformed! My dear friend from Sun Moon Lake! At that time, I did not have any clue (or even the slightest notion) that I would end up in Sun Moon Lake soon after, seeing it with my own eyes: the place where my friend gathers Her magic.

People still share legends about that very first batch of Elevation in Estonia. Steve and Triin mistakenly called the first batch "Ruby Red," when it was actually not Ruby Red at all; it was Elevation. They found this out a year later when we tried the real Ruby Red for the first time. There are also stories about hidden bags filled with a few grams of this very first batch of Sun Moon Lake tea deep in some old Estonian herb cupboard. If you just mention that tea here, some of us in Estonia will smile instantly and our eyes will brighten up. Of course, it was our first experience with Sun Moon Lake red tea and its elevated essence. I'm sure many of you have similar memories.

Elevation has had a meaningful impact in opening up our own Estonian tea culture (our hometown Cha Dao). Those kits of bowls and some Sun Moon Lake red tea ended up in many homes here. And who knows if it was Wu De's open heart or Elevation tea magic, but those little kits can were the first seeds of our tea community. And I'm proud to say that those seeds have sprouted and grown. The Estonian tea community was properly seed-propagated (like living tea)!

Shortly after Wu De's first visit, I left for several months in Asia. Throughout the entire journey, I had a small bag of Elevation with me. I did not drink it a lot, as there was not much and it was meant for very

special occasions only. Roaming around on the sandy roads of India or in lush Bali, I drank Elevation. The trip concluded with me standing in the middle of tea trees, surrounded by the most beautiful Nature in Sun Moon Lake, with the greatest tea lovers I know: Wu De and Steve. From the very first bowl tea I'd ever had to drinking Elevation every morning at home in Estonia to the front yard of a humble tea farmer in Taiwan offering to me the simplest yet most profound tea leaves on Earth! What an unexpected journey!

So I filled my stocks with many packages of Sun Moon Lake tea, bought my first side-handle pot and a kettle from Lin's and headed back to my home. "This is all you need to start serving," Wu De told me. I of course had just bits and pieces of experience or understanding of what goes in to serving tea for that matter. I had prepared tea for myself and sometimes also for others, but *serving*—that seemed something far bigger than I could handle. I must say that it was a kind of naïve beginner's mind that helped me overcome these fears and just start serving tea as best I could. I remember the first time I felt I was *serving* tea. I was offering tea to some friends late one evening and one of them, at some point deep in the session, said: "I know what you are doing!" And nothing else. Just that phrase and a subtle smile. It seemed awkward at first. "So what is it that I am doing besides making some tea?" I thought. But she saw more deeply and realized the service in the tea, that as a server you put something into the tea. You give! I did not comment on her insight, as there was really nothing to say.

And here we are: After four years on this journey, I am surrounded in every direction by Tea. I am part of the Estonian tea-serving group *Teeline*. My small tea space is filled with living teas and humble teapots. Every day, I share my path with my beloved tea angel Triin. Our dear baby-child Hiie-Mai is considered to be genetically the most puerhy in Estonia. And yes, it all started with a simple bowl of Elevation!



茶 Tian Wu with the oldest mother tree we've found in Sun Moon Lake.