

TEA OF THE MONTH

Since this month is devoted to incense, we needed to find a very fragrant tea. We reached out to Mr. Xie, whom you will definitely get to know around the Hut if you haven't met him yet. This month's tea is one of our favorite teas from Mr. Xie. It is called "*mi xiang* oolong," which literally translates to "honey fragrance," and you'll soon see why. But we asked him to process the tea traditionally, which means more oxidation and roast, pairing the processing with the tea, which is bug-bitten. *Mi xiang* oolong is completely organic, although it's plantation tea and not what we call a "living tea." It is a small-leaf varietal. If all tea in the world were grown as it should be—harvested once a year, allowed to grow up with room between trees, and so on—there wouldn't be nearly enough tea in the world. In this age, we must compromise. Mr. Xie's amazing story and his great teas make that easy to do.

As many of you who have been to our Center know, one of our modes of service is to set up our tea service at parks, trails or gatherings and serve free bowls to passersby. We do so without any agenda or teaching—simple tea in a quiet space of presence and loving-kindness. Tea is the great connector, connecting us to Nature and to each other. We blaze right past each other all the time, with

more modes of communication than ever before, and yet less human connection since creation. We offer people a bit of humanity, a smile, a chat or even some silence so they can get in touch with themselves before they move on. We do so at a variety of venues, including our monthly service at Hope Market in Taichung.

Hope Market is a group of organic producers who work together as a model for a sustainable future. It is mostly farmers, though there are producers of recycled clothes, jam, miso, and other handmade goods. They hold activities every week including courses conducted by various farmers in which the public can come and learn to make tofu, honey, organic fertilizer, etc. There is no currency exchange allowed within the Hope organization, but rather trade and barter. If a soy bean farmer wants some honey, he trades tofu for it. There is also a wonderful exchange of work as well, which means that if that same soy bean farmer needs some help harvesting, he asks his brothers and sisters in Hope and they all come to help, knowing that he will also help them if and when they need him to. It goes without saying that they will also help us build our permanent center to replace the temporary space we are in now. Every month, Hope also holds a market in a beautiful garden with riv-

ers, koi fish and lotus ponds. As members, we have been given a permanent booth in the market. We don't use tables like the others, though; instead, we set up on the ground and serve tea to the guests that come to buy vegetables and other organic products. Next to sending out this Global Tea Hut, Hope Market is the highlight of our month here.

It was at Hope that we met the amazing Mr. Xie Yuanzhai, to whom we of course gravitated immediately because of his organic tea. He came to the Center a few times and we started visiting his farm. It was so easy for a friendship to develop (organically, of course). He is kind and joyous, with smiles that fill a room, not to mention incredibly knowledgeable about tea. He's made every kind of tea you could imagine at some point, and has decades of experience.

Aside from providing this month's tea, which you are sure to love, Mr. Xie is a very important part of the scenery at our Center, and will be very important for many of you as well, because so many of our visitors come here with a curiosity about how tea is processed. It is very important to experience with your own hands just how difficult it is to make tea, so that in your own soreness you will develop a tremendous respect for the Leaf and its long and winding journey to you.



Calm Fragrance



Mingjian, Taiwan



2016 Mi Xiang Oolong



Taiwanese



~500 Meters

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



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This respect isn't just for the billions of years of evolution, or for the Nature we always wax poetic about: the wind and rain, sun and moonshine, minerals, mountain and water that flow from roots to crown. Our respect is also for the blood, sweat and tears of generation after generation of farmers. And there is a deep reverence in seeing just how much mastery, skill and, dare we say, art in the crafting of the Leaf. And so, with great joy we take as many of our guests as possible to a few different farms to try their hand at tea processing. It is amazing to make your own tea, and take it home with you. If you didn't have enough reasons to come stay with us, here's another: Mr. Xie has formally invited each and every one of you to come to his farm and make tea, eat a nice lunch and take the tea you picked and crafted home with you!

Mr. Xie is a third-generation farmer in Mingjian, Nantou, Central Taiwan. Mingjian is at a lower altitude in the foothills of the central mountain range. In the last few decades, such lower altitude tea has been eclipsed by the popularity of

the teas grown higher up. Though areas like Hsinchu and Miaoli counties, where Eastern Beauty is grown, have struggled since high-mountain oolongs have come to dominate the market, Mingjian has prospered by providing lower priced teas for export, or large-scale production for the bottled tea market (often called "Ready to Drink" or "RTD"). Mr. Xie's family has grown small-scale productions of oolong tea through three lifetimes, since before the higher teas even existed.

When we discuss organic farming and the need to make changes in tea farming—as well as other kinds of agriculture—it's important to remember that the farmers are always the first victims. It is they who handle the agrochemicals in large amounts, and most directly. Furthermore, it is only by humanizing and befriending them that we can bring about change. We must include rather than exclude—educate rather than ostracize.

Like so many other farmers, Mr. Xie started to get the nagging (coughing, wheezing) feeling that these chemicals were harmful to his family,

his community and his land. When his wife almost miscarried their second child in 1997, he'd had enough. Despite opposition from friends and family, Mr. Xie made a commitment to become an organic tea farmer, no matter the cost. He first attended some organic farming classes held by the MOA organization.

From 1997 to 2000, Mr. Xie and his family struggled to maintain their principles. His tea was sub-par and he lost most of his customers. His father, who had been worried when Mr. Xie suggested upsetting the status quo in the first place, was very critical of his decisions. Organic farming is difficult, and it requires a radical change in farming and processing methodology—changes that take time to learn. Rather than give up, as many would have, Mr. Xie got a part-time job as a painter and carpenter, working day and night—either painting or farming—to keep his family afloat. Finally, in the early 2000s, his acumen for organic farming improved to the point that he was able to take his teas to market again. Since then, he has gone on to win awards, been featured

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MOA Organic Certification

MOA stands for “Mokichi Okada Cultural Services Association International.” It was created by Mokichi Okada (1882-1955), who started three great projects in his lifetime: a “Mokichi Style Detoxification Treatment” for land, “Natural Agriculture, Drinks and Food” and “Fine Arts and Culture.” These three projects created affiliated groups of people with common goals to help each other. His overall aim was “to allow humanity to expand and flourish, helping create healthier people, families, regions, countries and culture.” His Japanese NPO natural agriculture culture movement created the Da Ren farm in 1982, and then in 1991 developed standards for healthy, organic agriculture. They began to set up branches and create a social system for theoretical and practical cooperation amongst farmers in Japan.

In April of 1990, a group of people who cared about Nature and were con-

cerned about environmental pollution wanted to change the situation in Taiwan. They joined the Japanese MOA International Association and created a sister organization to educate farmers and legally certify organic foods and drinks. This Taiwanese foundation was formed to explore and seek health and happiness for mankind and to guarantee environmentally sustainable and natural agriculture, expecting this ideology and the sustainable agriculture techniques behind it to spread all over the world.

MOA certification is rather rigorous and they do a great job of ensuring sustainable, organic agriculture without much of the bureaucracy or financial interests that trouble a lot of organic certification worldwide. Watching for the MOA seal on teas is a good way to enter the world of organic Taiwanese tea.

on TV and has even heard his father, now a sprightly eighty years old, bragging to others about how his son's tea is organic and good for the environment.

Mr. Xie's work hasn't stopped with his own farm. He knew that he would have to keep improving his skills, creating new and better teas, and help show his neighbors the value of organic farming, especially since their land and his are close enough to influence each other. He formed a co-op with other farmers and began teaching locals to shift to organic methods, offering them equal shares in their combined enterprise. As more people have joined this local group, the incentive for others to join has grown as well. To date, more than thirty farmers in the Mingjian region have gone organic, including Mr. Xie's immediate neighbors.

Mr. Xie's kind heart shows in his teas. He cares deeply about tea and the Earth. He produces green tea, large- and small-leaf red tea, as well as several kinds of oolong, and all with great skill. He's generous with his tea, supporting our efforts self-

lessly. To us, he is an inspiration and a kind of hero—the kind not talked about enough these days. It's easy to follow the crowd, maintain the status quo, or to say, “I am just one person. What can I do?” It is difficult to face criticism from family and friends and stand up for what you believe is right. The problem is that it is too easy for farmers to make more money with agrochemicals and to do so with less work. And that's also why so many of them are overusing fertilizers and pesticides, reducing the average lifespan of a tea bush to fifteen years, all in the name of personal gain. Many of them get cancer from improper exposure to such chemicals, themselves victims, as we mentioned above. Mr. Xie is a man who has seen a different way, and, even more inspiringly, lived that way and taught others to do so. And that is the spirit of Tea.

Tea of the Month

Calm Fragrance is a very special Tea of the Month. Over the years,

Mr. Xie has generously donated many teas to this Hut. However, this is the first time that we have ever worked together to produce a unique Global Tea Hut offering. It was so much fun sending samples back and forth, visiting him and even drinking some cups at Hope Market. (While Shen tended our boiled tea, Wu De chatted with Mr. Xie). The result is a delicious traditionally processed honey fragrance tea unlike any we've ever tried!

This month's tea has a honey fragrance because it is bug-bitten, much like Eastern Beauty. As more tea farmers have gone organic, they have had to come up with ways to cope with the katydids that come and eat their tea, especially when neighbors use pesticides and all the bugs come to their fields. Allowing bugs to bite the tea, and then processing it accordingly, began with Eastern Beauty in Beipu County, but has recently spread to Nantou as well. The resulting hybrid is sometimes called “Concubine Tea.” This month's tea is processed more like a traditional oolong, with less oxidation than either Eastern Beauty or Concubine Tea,

but much more oxidation and roast than your typical Taiwanese oolong. In the summer at lower altitudes, like Mingjian where Mr. Xie's farm resides, the population of leaf-hoppers (katydid/ *Jacobiasca formosana*) reaches its peak, and most of the tender tea leaves are eaten by these insects. The saliva of these katydids reacts with the tea, causing the honey fragrance. Other insects will also cause such a honey fragrance, but none as pronouncedly.

As we discussed in September's seminal Extended Edition (the largest English publication on Taiwanese oolong in the world), the greener, lightly-oxidized oolong teas that have become the mainstream in Taiwan are often not conducive to organic tea production. At very high altitudes, where there are fewer insects, such tea can be produced organically, but rarely is (chemical fertilizers and weed-killers are used). However, for most farms organic production is difficult because insect bites create holes in the tea leaves, which are bruised and immediately start oxidizing (that is why there is a reddish hue around the bite-holes). This increased oxidation means that the tea will not taste so green, fragrant and bright.

Oolong is semi-oxidized tea. Processing methods evolved over time to suit the tea that farmers had access to, so oolong is a terroir/variety as much as it is a processing type. Traditionally, before pesticides were invented, all tea leaves (just about) were bug-bitten, so the degree of semi-oxidation was much higher, as was the roast, to compensate for and complement the nature of the leaves. Making very light oolong really demands pesticide use if it is to be productive on any kind of large scale. Sometimes, there is a need to choose between fragrant, light and green oolong and environmental sustainability. We'll take the latter over flavor any day! But, to be honest, we actually prefer deeper, traditionally processed oolongs more. They may not have the same flowery fragrance, which—don't get us wrong—we also enjoy very much, but they often have a deeper body, more lasting Qi and mouth sensations and are closer to what oolong can achieve. And that is

why oolong production was carried out in that way for centuries, until the mainstream got involved, and, as many tea vendors the world over will tell you, the mainstream likes green tea best. It is fragrant and bright, the leaves are beautiful and it is easy to prepare. We love green tea, too. But we are also glad that not all producers are making oolong like green tea, and that we can still call Mr. Xie and order a traditionally processed oolong and he'll not only know what we are talking about and why we want such a tea, but has the ability to produce it for us.

Allowing the bugs to bite the tea means it will be more oxidized right off the bush. It also means that you can process it to have a honey fragrance. The bugs bite the leaves and their saliva reacts with the compounds in the tea to start oxidation before the leaves are even plucked. This happens in the summertime, usually between June and August. When the tea is less oxidized, the end result is a musky, honey fragrance that lingers in the back of the mouth. Our Tea of the Month is from August.

Calm Fragrance started with a Four Seasons Spring varietal (*Si Ji Chun*, 四季春), which is a natural varietal born in Taiwan. We chose this because we knew we were going to increase the oxidation and roast to get a darker, more full-bodied brew—and hopefully also enhance the honey fragrance (*mi xiang*, 蜜香). *Si Ji Chun* is more robust than other varieties, with thick, strong and juicy leaves. It is mostly used to make *Tieguanyin* in the northern tea-growing region of Muzha. We planned to process this tea like a traditional *Tieguanyin*, with high roasting, so it seemed like the perfect choice. This proved correct after we tasted several varieties.

The tea was bug-bitten, plucked, withered outdoors and then indoors, shaken and mixed in piles (*jiao ban*), withered more, fired to arrest oxidation and de-enzyme (*sha qing*), rolled to break down the cells and further oxidation, as well as to shape the tea (*rou nian*), and then roasted twice—once to dry the tea and then for a longer time to add flavor and fragrance. We asked Mr. Xie to increase the

withering and rolling and also roast the tea deeper, to give it a stronger body with a more lively honey fragrance that we hope will complement this month's incense—the kind you'll be burning and the kind you'll be reading about!

In the end, we had to adjust the oxidation and roast several times. We ended up choosing a batch that was only oxidized slightly more than usual—typical honey fragrance oolong would be around 30%; we ended up going up to around 35-40%. This was because we preferred a lighter oxidation/heavier roast combination to the opposite (more oxidation, less roast). Often, you can't have both. You could think of this using the metaphor of taking water from a bucket—both the oxidation and roast subtract water, so the more oxidation, which comes first, the less water you have left for roasting. This analogy is oversimplified, but works since the reality of the situation actually does have to do with the moisture content of the leaves. Calm Fragrance was roasted twice, the second deeper than the first. Ideally, we would let it sit for around six months before sharing it, but we only had a month, so you can still taste some of the roast. Still, it is an amazing creation, and we are very proud of it!

The Qi of this tea is uplifting, sweeping upwards. You will feel elated drinking it, perhaps, like us, feeling the joyful toil Mr. Xie has impressed upon it. There is a great fellowship in this tea: between our fortuitous meeting at Hope Market, the many cups we've shared with Mr. Xie and now in the passing on of his kindness to you. Light your Aloeswood incense, fill up a few cups and sit back and relax. This is a lazy-afternoon, watching-the-sunlight-play-with-the-curls-of-steam-and-incense kind of Global Tea Hut month!

茶 *Si Ji Chun* flushes reddish purple when exposed to more sunlight, like in low-elevations (Mingjian), due to anthocyanins in the leaf, which are a response to UV rays.



Calm Fragrance

Like so many of you, we also sit down with friends to share the Tea of the Month. And though we drank Calm Fragrance at a different time than you, we are reminded once again of the interconnectedness we share within this global tea community. Just as we set out altar cups in acknowledgment of our tea brothers and sisters the world over, we also drank this tea with all of you in mind, knowing that somewhere under this global thatched roof, you'll likely be doing the same! And just as you might discuss your experiences drinking this tea with your friends, we did the same:

茶 Delicate and subtle with a beautiful golden color. There is slight hint of sweetness and blossom in this light and soothing oolong tea. It is unobtrusive and uplifting, like being hugged on the inside. It's a bring-you-to-your-happy-place kind of tea!

-Debbie Phillips, Canada

茶 The flavor of this tea was like an open door, welcoming me into a clean home. A subtly sweet aroma drew me in further and further and asked of me to be still. The longer I sat with this tea, the more Her fragrance and flavor came back on the breath. There was an enjoyable bitterness near the back of my mouth reminding me that medicine is sometimes bittersweet.

-Shen Su, Taiwan/Canada

茶 This tea came to me with the soothing state of pause. By the lingering, bittersweet feeling and rich aroma, I was invited to a good place of clear thought. It felt comforting to stay with Her friendly company cup after cup, letting Her cool down my mind and make more space for some good old clarity.

-Samu Valleala, Finland

茶 Each cup reveals a fascinating, elegant and flowery aroma. The rich aftertaste of this tea returned on my breath, while the rising steam carried me down memory lane. I could see my uncle in his country household during a very different time in Taiwan, many years ago. He was always the first to rise. He would boil water and drink his favorite tea. After a few cups of presence, he would put away his simple teaware and start the day's work!

-Joyce, Taiwan

茶 Like an old friend, She seems so familiar. At first, She seems bitter, but this gives way to an underlying sweetness. Layer after layer, She unfurls, always offering something new if you join Her: a new flavor, smell, sensation, a new piece of wisdom... On the surface, this tea is simple, but underneath is a deep complexity.

-Sam Gibb, Taiwan/New Zealand



Check out the video
on brewing tips now!

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Brewing Tips

While you can watch a few balls of this magical tea unfurl in a bowl, such a majestic oolong should really be steeped gongfu. This means paying attention to all aspects of the brewing: create time and space in your life, use the techniques we've discussed in previous issues to make a nice chaxi, use fresh spring water (or the best bottled water if that is unavailable), charcoal if possible to heat the water, a nice Yixing pot and porcelain cups, and, most importantly, a calm and centered heart. With the right teaware and brewing skills, this tea will unravel far beyond its potential as organic plantation tea, lifting you and your guests skyward.

Oolong is always better in small sips. Oolong enters the subtle body upwards, through the nasal cavity. Puerh, red and black tea and some other teas all enter the subtle body through the stomach and chest, and are therefore better in larger cups and drunk in big gulps. Traditional gongfu cups were therefore very small, since gongfu was born to brew oolong. Try taking as small a sip as you can and notice the difference.

For the first time ever, we are going to make a video with some details on the history, lore and practicalities of gongfu tea brewing. Wu De has agreed to demonstrate and discuss how to brew proper, traditional gongfu tea and why it is important. If you haven't been tuning in, be sure to do so this month as you won't want to miss this rare opportunity to improve your brewing skills.

