

SHOU PUERH & LIU BAO

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As a student of the Leaf who too often mistakes his black tea for shou puerh or vice versa, I would personally love to hear your thoughts on these two very different teas, either via email (globalteahut@gmail.com) or on our discussion board on the website under the tab "Connect." I will also be comparing these two teas as my homework throughout this month and sharing my thoughts with you.

As we enter the middle of winter for most of us, we continue to drink darker, older and more fermented or roasted teas to keep us warm! Among that honorary group of winter-appropriate teas, we are often compelled towards shou puerh and Liu Bao black tea (pronounced "show" and "leo," respectively). They both love to be drunk in the winter! When drinking shou puerh and Liu Bao, it is clear that they are a lot alike. But they also have characteristic differences that make them both quite unique. It will be important to focus on the differences between these two teas in order to understand which one we are drinking.

Why These Two Teas

First of all, in order to learn to taste the differences between any teas, you need to drink them! Gongfu tea would be an excellent brewing method to taste these two genres of tea. But, you will have to work with what you have got. It can be a little difficult to drink a lot of some genres of tea that aren't particularly available or widely known about, like certain black teas. In fact, for some of you, this will be the first Liu Bao black tea you have ever drunk, which makes it a good chance to familiarize ourselves with some of the more common qualities associated with this type of black tea.

Next, why are even looking at the differences between shou puerh and Liu Bao? Does this somehow suggest that they share enough similarities to warrant a discussion on their differences? Well, yes and no. For those who grew up drinking black tea, shou puerh and aged sheng puerh, or for the

experienced connoisseurs out there, it might seem unnecessary to even talk about this as they are so obviously different. But for many of us who are new to black or puerh tea, it is well worth comparing the two because our palates aren't as accustomed to these genres, and to the uninitiated they do share some similarities. Also, because the popularity of puerh tea greatly overshadows that of black tea, and because shou puerh is cheaper and more accessible than aged sheng puerh, it's no wonder that anytime we find ourselves drinking a dark, fermented tea, we tend to think it is shou puerh.

Sometimes we mistakenly assume we are drinking shou puerh when in fact we are drinking Liu Bao. One could also mistake black tea for aged sheng puerh, though this is less often the case in my observations. From a production point of view, it also makes more sense to confuse black tea with shou puerh because they both go through similar steps of post-production artificial fermentation, which lends them both similar profiles. But much of what distinguishes these teas is the different terroirs and varieties. The environments in which both tea plants grow are very different and the tea plants themselves are very different. In general, shou puerh is made from large-leaf tea varieties in Yunnan province, whereas Liu Bao is made from medium-leaf tea varieties in Guangxi province. (There isn't usually a "medium-leaf" category. There are small and large leaf categories, but the actual size of leaves used to produce Liu Bao are somewhere in between, so we say "medium.") We must learn to distinguish the different environments in the cup, and move from there to the subtler differences in processing.

Differences

Good shou puerh should be thick, milky, round in texture, sweet, creamy and very dark in color. The aroma and flavor of shou puerh always reminds me of mulched leaves, or wet decomposing leaves on a forest floor. It's a very earthy and enjoyable quality in my experience. Remember, flavors and aromas are not reliable measures of a fine tea because they are so subjective. What tastes like mulched leaves to me in shou puerh might taste like something quite different to you. But if it's a consistent quality that you notice in a particular tea, then it can help you to decipher what type of tea you are



drinking. Due to its earthiness, I also find shou puerh quite grounding, making it excellent to drink when you or your guests need a little balance. As well, shou tea can be quite warming in the body, and never really offers the opposite experience. Try drinking a shou puerh in the midst of summer and see what happens. You will likely end up sweating bullets! Though I love the flavor of shou, I don't drink it in the hotter times of the year for just that reason. Its warming Qi is not suitable for hot weather, but it is worth a try to gain an experiential understanding.

Liu Bao tea, on the other hand, can be both warming and cooling. This is one of the amazing qualities of some black teas. I more often drink them in the cooler months of the year, but they can be very enjoyable even in the summer under the right conditions. In the winter, however, shou is almost always more warming than Liu Bao in my experience. And while they are both quite dark teas, I find shou is usually slightly darker in the liquor and in the spent leaves. Not always, but often. In comparison to shou, Liu Bao also tends to be lighter in body and texture, with a more rising or uplifting quality. One very unique characteristic often found in Liu Bao is a metallic aftertaste. True, it is a flavor, and therefore

subjective, but it tends to be generally agreed upon that Liu Bao has a metal-like quality on the tongue. This is an important quality to look out for. See if you notice it in this month's tea. Another common flavor associated with Liu Bao is the fragrance of betel nut. This is something I am not familiar with at all, but for those of you who are, see if you can also notice it. Liu Bao also has an aftertaste of smoked pine because pinewood is used in the drying process. It is also often earthy like shou, but, as you can see, Liu Bao has some distinguishing characteristics as well.

If you can, drink them side by side or one after the other to really highlight these differences. We did just that for one of our tea classes here at the center and shared a group discussion afterwards. We drank a shou followed by a Liu Bao and there was a lot of agreement in our observations. The shou was more earthy, thick, sweet, warming and grounding, whereas the Liu Bao was lighter, rising, "piney" with a metallic aftertaste, and with more noticeable mouth sensations like splash, coating, saliva production, *hui gan*, etc. (The Liu Bao was finer in this case, but could go the other way depending on the tea. Many shou puerhs are great as well.)

In general, if you find yourself drinking a dark, fermented tea, here are some qualities to think about if you're not quite sure what tea it is. If it has a metallic aftertaste, aromatic hints of betel nut, or smoked pine with an uplifting Qi that comfortably warms the body in cooler weather or cools the body in warmer temperature, you might very well be drinking Liu Bao black tea. If your tea is thick and dark, creamy and sweet, with strong earthy flavors and very warming energies, and perhaps has an unfortunate pindy flavor or aroma to it, it's likely you are drinking a shou puerh. As you can see, they really are very different teas and we should learn to refine our palates to distinguish between them.

These are very broad guidelines to learning the difference between shou puerh and Liu Bao. Within each genre and each type of tea lies a completely unique experience and so it's difficult to generalize. There is a vast variety of flavors, aromas and mouth sensations for shou and Liu Bao tea. Plus, the brewing method, amount of leaf, length of infusion, type and temperature of water, etc., can change everything! But here are some criteria that we can work with to start learning how to differentiate these wonderful teas. Let us know how your journey steepes!

