TEA OF THE MONTH

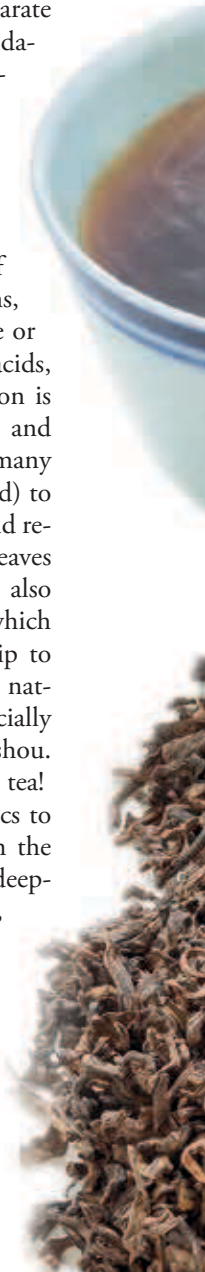
Over the course of this issue, we're going to spend a lot of time talking about tea and food, so we thought an extra-long, super in-depth Tea of the Month article was in order! This month we have a classic shou tea that checks all the boxes most tea lovers list when evaluating a shou puerh. This dark, rich tea is perfect for taking a nice, bowl-in-hand, warm and cozy look out the window at the cold weather surrounding most of us. And as we steep up this dark, earthy brew, we have the perfect opportunity to explore the genre of shou puerh together. We have written extensively on puerh in the past, but never really poured a deep brew of shou by itself. So let's add an extra scoop of shou to our old Global Tea Hut pot and pour a thoroughly steeped liquor that satiates our thirst for understanding this genre, from its history to production and from leaf to the characteristics that make a fine shou tea.

After a few cups have calmed us down, let's start with the basics of puerh before we steep some darker shou brews. To begin, we have to start our puerh map with a basic sketch that divides the genre into sheng and shou. Sheng means "raw" puerh; it's the greener, more astringent kind of puerh, which can be enjoyed when it is young and fresh or aged to ferment naturally over time. On the other hand, shou, which means "ripe," is artificially fermented by humans, so it is darker to begin with. The words "sheng (生)" and "shou (熟)" are used in Chinese to discuss food as well, referring to "raw" or "uncooked" versus "cooked" meals. The terms describe the ripening of fruit as well. Understanding this distinction is important for exploring puerh, and more specifically shou puerh, more deeply.

Over the years, we have talked extensively about our unique categorization of tea, which is important because it helps you explore and understand tea better. Traditionally, there were six genres of tea: white, yellow, green, black, red and oolong. Categories are ultimately arbitrary, and only useful in communication and education. And when our understanding of the world changes, the world itself changes or perhaps both, then our categories also need to shift. And that is what has happened in the tea world—*change*. Puerh used to reside comfortably in the black tea category (not red, which is often called "black" in the West), but that was back when all the puerh consumed was either naturally fermented (aged) sheng or artificially fermented shou tea. All the tea was dark, in other words. Nowadays, however, millions of tea lovers are drinking younger sheng, which doesn't really fit in any category—it's a bit like a green tea, but it is more withered/oxidized than most green tea. Due to the unique terroir of Yunnan, the very special trees used to produce puerh, and its unique history, processing, aging and appreciation, we have found that students of tea understand the genres of tea more quickly and clearly when we separate puerh as a seventh genre. And the fact that students understand tea better and more expediently when providing puerh as a genre of its own is all the argument we need for presenting the genres in this way!

In order to better understand tea processing, we also have to separate oxidation from fermentation. Oxidation is an enzymatic process: basically, cellular breakdown due, of course, to exposure to oxygen, like when a banana or apple turns brown on the counter. Fermentation is similar, but is metabolic and involves the presence of bacteria and other microorganisms, like the changes in yogurt, cheese or alcohol. Sugar is converted into acids, gases, and alcohol. This distinction is important for understanding tea, and especially shou puerh, because many kinds of tea are withered (oxidized) to change the chemistry of the tea and remove moisture from the brittle leaves before processing. But puerh is also fermented post-production, which means it has a strong relationship to microorganisms—whether it is naturally fermented (aged) or artificially fermented in the factory, as with shou. Micro-terroir is essential to puerh tea!

Having a few cups of the basics to warm our bellies is always worth the effort, so before we turn to some deeper topics like the history of shou, the changes in its processing over time and the aging and appreciation of this tea, let's review the basics of puerh production so that we're all arriving to this shou gathering with the same understanding.



Old-Town Gathering

Menghai, Yunnan, China

2014 Shou Puerh Tea

Dai Aboriginals

~1500 Meters

熟普洱

Basic Puerh Processing

Like many genres of tea, puerh starts with "maocha (抹茶)," which means "rough" or "unfinished" tea. You'll hear this term discussed most often with regard to the genres of oolong and puerh, as they traditionally have "finishing" steps that occur later and/or at a different location from where the tea was initially processed. In puerh processing, the tea is processed fully (dried) and then sent to a factory to be blended, compressed or made into shou. And even back in the day when the final steps were done at farm, they were still done at a later date (sometimes months later), so the term "maocha" was still relevant. In oolong processing, it is the roasting which is done later, or traditionally at the shop rather than the farm. The reason the finishing steps in these teas are completed later is that the farmers have to focus on the harvested tea on the day it is plucked or the quality will suffer. And since there is freshly picked tea coming in every morning during the harvest season, farmers have little time to sleep, let alone finish the tea. These days, almost all maocha is sent to be finished at factories that want control over the finishing steps like blending, choosing sheng or shou, and also deciding what size or shape to compress the tea into. But before we get to the factory, let's understand what maocha is.

Puerh maocha is harvested; withered out and indoors depending on the place/tradition and the weather; fired (*sha qing*, 殺菁) to arrest the oxidation of the withering and de-enzyme the tea; rolled (*rou nian*, 揉捻) to shape the tea and further break down the cells; and then sun-dried. The two defining steps that make puerh unique are the firing and drying. The de-enzyming of tea is done to stop the withering and also to remove green enzymes that make the tea bitter and astringent. Like most teas, puerh is fired in a wok (often wood-fired), but it is done at a lower temperature and for a shorter duration than most kinds of tea. This, along with the varietal of puerh, is why young sheng is so bitter and astringent. Puerh is fired in this way to allow the heat-resistant spores to survive the processing, since they will be paramount in the post-production fermentation process. Sun-drying is also what separates puerh from most other kinds of tea, and it is done for the same reason, since sunlight and heat are just what the spores need to start colonizing the tea again.

After the maocha is dried, it leaves the farm for the factory. However, it is ideal to finish the tea at source, since the water and microecology will be unique for each place, but that rarely happens anymore. The tea is then blended or left single-region and compressed into various shapes of cakes as sheng puerh, which can then be enjoyed young or aged for later. The tea is steamed, compressed and dried on racks (often with fans, but traditionally in the sun) before being wrapped individually in natural paper and then often in a stack made of bamboo skin called a "*tong* (筒)." But if the tea is to be shou, it has a whole other journey to travel.

Shou puerh is artificially fermented by piling in a process called "*wo dui* (渥堆)," which is essentially composting: the tea is piled to about a meter, sprayed with water and usually covered with a thermal blanket. The heat inside is why shou is sometimes called "cooked" puerh. Most skilled factories will add microbes from previous batches. They can do this by adding the slurry run-off water from the previous piling or add what are called "*cha tou* (茶頭)," which are microbe-dense balls of shou that are often found at the bottom of the piles. The pile is then stirred regularly until the desired degree of artificial fermentation is reached. To fully ferment the tea takes between forty-five and sixty days. Most shou nowadays is fully fermented.

Pronunciation

Since many Westerners have troubles pronouncing some puerh terminology, we thought we'd help you so you can say things correctly next time. First of all, and we don't know how or why this started, but many Westerners like to say, "Poo air" when pronouncing puerh, which is completely incorrect. The second character in "pu erh (普洱)" is pronounced like the "er" in the English word "her." Say, "her hair is lovely." Now, pronounce the "erh" like the end of "her" or "stir," as in "stir the soup." You could even say "poo her" once and then drop the "h," so it becomes "poo er."

Also, some Westerners pronounce "shou" like the word "shoe," which is also incorrect, though it has more of a basis. Actually, some people in Yunnan, especially around Kunming, pronounce it that way, so Westerners who visit there and hear that accent often mimic that pronunciation. Actually, "shou" is pronounced just like the English word "show," as in "to go see a show." If you say it like that, you will be much closer to the proper pronunciation!

In this magazine, we spell "puerh" this way and often do not include tonal marks because we hope to Anglicize certain tea terminology, incorporating it into the English language—with proper pronunciation, of course.

The Processing of Maocha

Shou piling actually happens in two phases, wet and dry. The first, wet piling is fermentation of bacteria breaking down the cells of the puerh. This piling is much deeper, usually a meter. During the second, drier piling, the thermal blanket is removed (if one was used) and the piles are thinned out (usually to around 20cm). This is where the yeasts and molds become more active in the tea. If the tea is destined to be loose-leaf shou, like our Tea of the Month, Old-Town Gathering, then it will be stirred and dried like this thoroughly. If the shou is to be compressed, the second stage of piling will be cut short while the tea is still slightly damp.

Shou tea has to be compressed before it dries—right after the piling. Some factories do compress aged loose-leaf shou later, but doing so always damages the quality of the tea. Once shou tea dries, the leaves are tight and twisted from the heavy fermentation, so getting them to stick in a cake at a later date requires a much heavier, hotter and deeper steaming than with other puerh, which effects the quality of the tea, lending it boiled-tea flavors. It is, therefore, always better to compress shou right after piling. If one wanted to use aged tea, it would be better to age the maocha as sheng and then pile/compress it later.

The Processing of Shou

- Sorting
- Piling
  Artificial Fermentation
- Drying
- Steaming
- Compression
- Packaging

茶 The first piling happens under thermal blankets. The tea is essentially composted. This piling utilizes bacteria, ideally introduced from previous batches.

茶 Sometimes the second, thinner piling is swept up into high heaps and then stirred back down to thin piles. This process involves molds and yeasts more than bacteria, and dries the tea out.

茶 Shou is then immediately compressed. The tea is weighed using old-fashioned scales and plates. Workers learn to gauge amount by sight and are often correct to the gram! The tea is then steamed and compressed using machines.

History

With an understanding of puerh processing, let's steep another pot and turn to the history of shou puerh, exploring how this subcategory of puerh began and the changes it has gone through over time. There's a lot in the history of shou puerh that will help you to better appreciate our Tea of the Month, Old-Town Gathering, which is a great example of a classic shou.

Deciding when to begin the history of shou puerh depends on how we define shou. If shou is any artificially fermented puerh, then it is actually quite old, since aboriginals have been artificially fermenting puerh tea in many different ways for centuries by roasting it, burying it, stuffing it in bamboo, etc. Different tribes had different ways of consuming puerh, but it was rare to drink it young and green, as young sheng puerh is astringent and considered "cold" in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and therefore not so healthy for most Chinese people who have "cold" or "cool" constitutions. Consequently, most tribes developed their own way of artificially fermenting, roasting or boiling puerh to make it more palatable and healthy. For the sake of this discussion, however, we are going to restrict the term "shou" to its modern sense of piled puerh that has gone through *wo dui*.

Piled shou puerh is a modern subgenre, beginning in the 1960s. In most books and articles you will find either the dates 1972, 1973 or 1974 listed as the beginning of shou puerh. There was some confusion, but recent research into historical records has verified that 1973 is the correct date. 1973 is the date the government licensed the first commercial production of shou puerh tea for sale, starting with the Kunming Factory. However, research and under-the-table batches were being produced as early as 1965 (perhaps even earlier). It took the factories a number of years to demonstrate a consistency, safety and quality that the government would license (all factories were state-run during the communist era, of course). More of the batches from that time were done for research, though it is likely that the factories tried to mitigate costs by selling some of this tea illegally as well. (We actually have a '60s shou brick here at the Center.)

Sheng puerh takes seventy years to reach full maturity. This number is not arbitrary. As sheng puerh ages further and further, the aging process itself begins to slow down. The cells crumble onto one another and the fermentation therefore relaxes. Even a beginner can tell the difference between a one- and three-year-old puerh, just as the difference between five and ten years is obvious. But the differences between ten, fifteen and twenty years becomes harder to distinguish, requiring more experience with aged and aging puerh. After that, even the experts have to start gauging the tea in terms of decades. At seventy years the physical appearance of the liquor will not change anymore: black in the center, moving out into browns, then auburn and maroon with a golden ring at the edge. The tea will change beyond that, adding depth in Qi and flavor, but those changes will be for the next generation. Of course, puerh can be enjoyed long before full maturity—even thirty-year-old puerh is marvelous. Nonetheless, it is easy to understand why producers, distributors and consumers would look for ways to speed up a process that is measured in decades or even generations.

The process of speeding up fermentation began long ago with wet storage. Puerh lovers, especially in Hong Kong, would carefully store their tea for a few years in warehouses near the sea or in basements with very high humidity, rotating it to higher, drier warehouses occasionally. This "traditional storage" would greatly speed up the fermentation process, decreasing the quality of the tea but allowing people to enjoy it much sooner. In the past, the raw material used to make puerh was extremely inexpensive (especially compared to its cost these days), so they didn't mind such compromises. Factories wanted to speed this process up even more, inspired by the artificial fermentation that was already very established in

Cha Tou

"Cha tou" literally translates to "tea head," though "tea nugget" is a better choice. Cha tou are tea balls that form during the piling of shou puerh. They can happen in one of two ways. Smaller, harder and denser cha tou can form in the first, wet piling of shou puerh when it is sprayed with water and often covered with a thermal blanket. Even though the tea is stirred regularly, it is much hotter at the bottom of the pile, where these little balls form. It is much more humid, wet and there is little oxygen at the bottom, and depending on how and where the tea is piled, the very bottom can be hard to access, whether the tea is stirred by hand or with pitchfork-like tools. Cha tou can also form in the second stage of piling, when the molds and yeasts become active and the moisture is drying. This kind is larger and looser, as it is formed by the clumping of the tea as it dries out. The best cha tou are usually smaller and were mixed around, so that they never over-fermented: spending some time exposed to oxygen near the top of the pile after their formation in the hot, wet depths.

Traditionally, cha tou were used to introduce bacteria into future batches of shou puerh or even discarded as unwanted byproducts of shou production. Sometimes, factory workers were allowed to take them home or certain producers would ask for some, so you can occasionally find old ones, but they are very rare (we have some 1970s cha tou here at the Center; remind us and we'll brew you some when you're here next time). In recent years, however, producers have found that the cha tou can be quite sweet and delicious, especially when blended together with regular shou tea. Chinese people say that they taste like prunes. They are fruity, indeed, with hints of nuttiness and sometimes even taste like chocolate, especially when blended well with normal shou tea. If you don't blend them with regular shou, you really have to boil the cha tou to get the most out of them, and, even after hours of boiling, they rarely open up—which is kind of amazing when you think about it.

These days it is pretty easy to find some cha tou on the market, and if you can find an organic version, they are fun to mix with shou, boil or even use as the wood or earth in a Five Element blend. Like most shou on the market, cha tou and other teas are usually cursory blends of whatever is leftover these days—rarely made from nice raw material, rarely intentionally produced and rarely piled with skill. But when you do find some good cha tou, they can be amazing, sweet and very fun to play with!

the black tea industry of next-door Guangxi, producing Liu Bao like last month's tea. Liu Bao and Yunnan had already been exchanging raw material and ideas for decades, so it came as no surprise that researchers from factories in Yunnan would one day show up in Liu Bao to study the artificial fermentation there. Of course, they had to adapt the process because the varietals, trees and leaves of Yunnan are different from those of Liu Bao and other black teas, and also, perhaps more importantly, the microbial ecology is very different. The "microbial terroir" is why various kinds of beer in Germany, wines in France or even Maotai alcohol in China are not reproducible elsewhere, despite many attempts to imitate famous examples. The same is true of cheeses, which will be very different when fermented in different places, even if the milk and cultures are the same. Once again, we're reminded how important microbes are to puerh.

The main difference between the piling of shou and other black teas is that the piles are deeper, wetter and hotter. The thicker, larger leaves of big-leaf Yunnanese puerh require a deeper pile and the wetness perhaps was inspired by the "traditional" wet storage—shou puerh is, in fact, made with the wettest of the wet storage. Wetter piles also work faster. Finally, the factories in Yunnan added the thermal blanket to increase the speed and degree of fermentation.

It may go without saying that the puerh factories were not successful in reproducing in a month what Nature makes in seventy years. Like "traditional" wet storage, the shou process of artificially fermenting (piling/composting) the tea reduces its quality in terms of flavor, and even more so in Qi, sacrificing much of the energy of the mountain and tree. What they were successful in achieving was adding complexity to puerh by creating a subgenre that needs to be understood and evaluated on its own terms. You really cannot compare shou to sheng in any meaningful way, whether the sheng is young or aged.

Changes in Shou Production Over Time

A lot has changed in the puerh industry since its boom in the early 2000s, including shou production. Most of the shou tea that was produced in the 1970s and '80s used much better raw material and was intentionally blended and produced and then piled with much greater skill than is typical today. For all these reasons, one could argue, the quality of shou has significantly dropped in the modern era. Each of these three quality losses—in *material*, *intention* and *piling*—is worth discussing in detail.

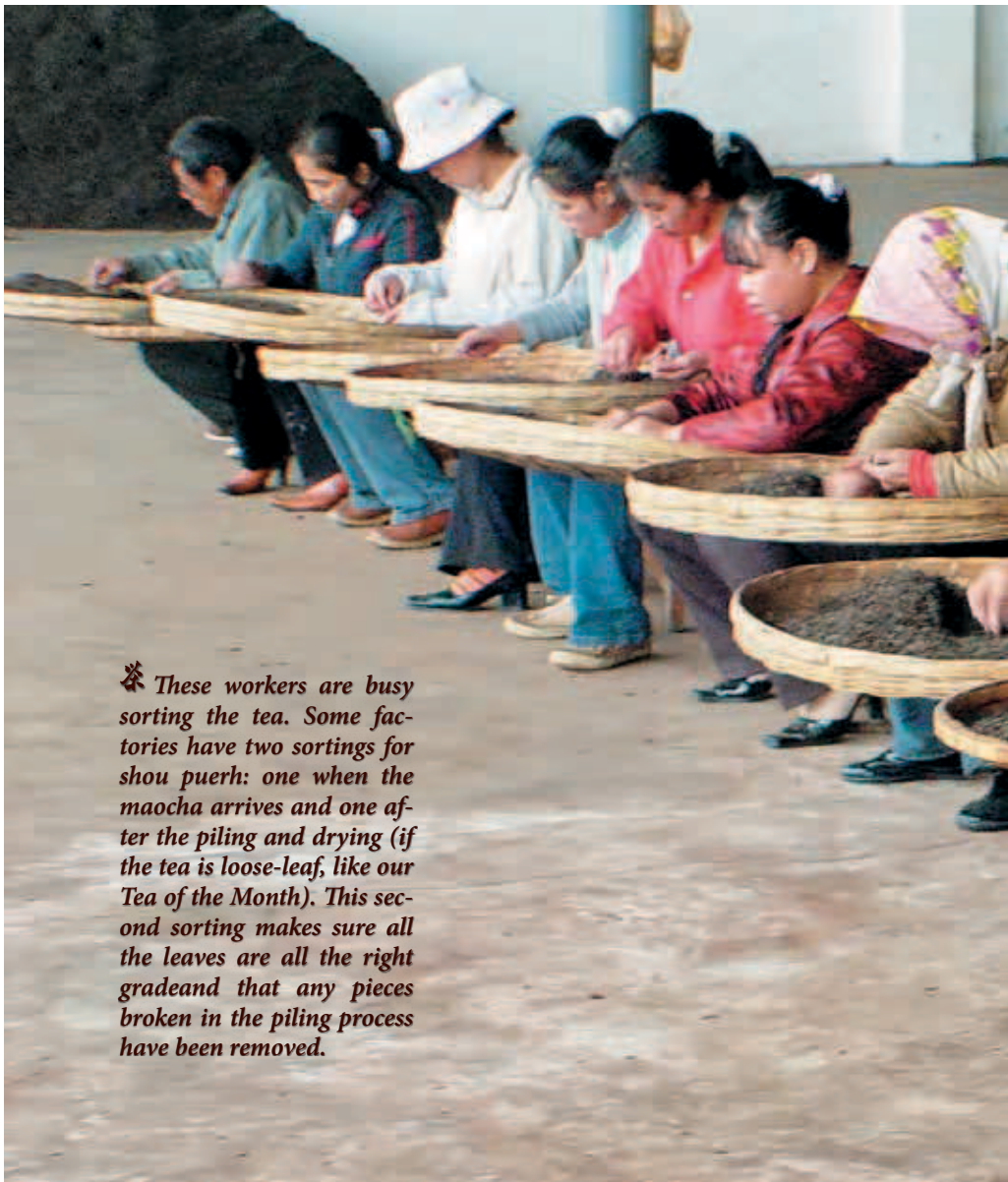
In that way, we'll understand the modern history of shou and further appreciate Old-Town Gathering, since it is a rare example of a recent, classic shou puerh.

Different genres of tea mark quality based on a ratio between the terroir/trees and the processing skills of the producer. A tea's quality, in other words, is one part raw material and one part the gongfu of the tea maker. In oolong, quality is at least 50/50. Puerh is unique, however, in that much more of the quality of any given puerh tea derives from the terroir and the tree(s). Which part of Yunnan a tea comes from, how old the trees are and what part of the mountain/forest they come from and whether they are wild, semi-wild ("eco-arboreal," as we call it) or plantation trees (*tai di cha*, 台地茶) will determine a puerh's quality. And these are indeed the questions any tea lover is asking in the puerh shop. When you couple the fact that the quality of a puerh is up to ninety percent in the terroir and trees with the knowledge that the piling process of shou decreases quality, you can begin to understand the main reason the overall quality of shou puerh has dropped in recent years.

Back in the 1970s and '80s almost all puerh was wild, old-growth trees or eco-arboreal trees (older and nearer the village, but still biodiverse and "living" as we often say). What plantations existed were much smaller, completely organic and therefore very healthy. Remember, also that the cost of this tea was *extremely* low—often a fraction of a dollar for a kilogram! As a result, the factories had access to large quantities of high-quality maocha to use in puerh production, both sheng and shou. What's changed? Well, as you no doubt have already realized (or will very soon as your puerh journey continues), raw material from nice regions and/or old trees in Yunnan has grown incredibly expensive. As an example, many of you may feel like the 250g Ai Lao cakes (Mountain Gate) we made last year are quite expensive at $108. A few wiser readers emailed us, though, surprised at the very low price. Since our fundraiser is transparent, percentage-based and relies on donations, the prices always reflect our cost; the fact is that Auntie Ai donated sixty percent of last year's tea, which means that the wholesale cost at farm is actually higher than our final price by quite a lot! Furthermore, Ai Lao is actually amongst the cheapest mountains for old-growth raw material in Yunnan, as it is much less famous and more remote. The tea is also very unique in its flavor profile. Suffice it to say, nice maocha is very costly!

As puerh raw material has become more costly, it has also caused environmental destruction, which means it has also become rarer. The high costs and rarity of fine maocha mean that there is almost no way that any producer would ever use such tea to make shou puerh. The first reason why they wouldn't consider this is, of course, the cost. If they use nice maocha from old trees to make shou, then they would have to sell their shou cakes for at least the same price as the sheng (maybe more, since shou has the added work of piling). No one would be willing to pay the same price for a shou as for a sheng, since the shou is of lower quality. Second, of course, is that it is actually a shame to decrease the quality of rare, old-growth tea by piling/artificially fermenting it. For these reasons, it is rare to find a shou that uses nice material in its production, which was so common in the '70s, '80s and even '90s.

The second change is in intention. Very few shou puerh teas are intentionally produced these days. Back in the day, factories would take the time to develop nice shou blends, especially given their access to a plethora of different, affordable high-quality maocha. Nowadays, most shou is made from whatever is left over after the sheng tea is blended/sold. It is rare for a producer or factory to set out to make a fine shou puerh, though they all claim that they do. This is not to say that this doesn't happen; it does—you can still find nice shou puerh, like our Tea of the Month. But intentionally blending a nice shou puerh doesn't happen very often these days. Usually,



茶 ***These workers are busy sorting the tea. Some factories have two sortings for shou puerh: one when the maocha arrives and one after the piling and drying (if the tea is loose-leaf, like our Tea of the Month). This second sorting makes sure all the leaves are all the right gradeand that any pieces broken in the piling process have been removed.***

it is a matter of choosing from leftovers, which is very understandable considering how valuable sheng puerh is, and also considering that it really is a bit sad to artificially ferment/pile (*wo dui*) rare, old-growth tea, and not let it age naturally, or at least enjoy it young, fresh and sheng. This means it is also hard to find organic shou puerh, as it is often so cursorily blended. Our Tea of the Month, however, is certified organic and intentionally made!

Finally, we come to the piling phase. Since cost was lower and factories were much more devoted to their craft, piling skills back in the day were much better than nowadays, when shou has been dwarfed by the booming sheng market. Of course, any skill (any gongfu) is beyond generalization or brief summary. Those who have mastered a craft know that the subtleties of their art go way beyond what a few sentences can ever hope to capture. With that in mind, we can discuss two ways that the piling skills of former times were superior: first, there was a better use of previous batches by incorporating the microbes of other pilings to great effect; and second, the artificial fermentation was almost always stopped at a specific point. It is the second of these skills that most people who have explored shou through time, drinking various vintages, will testify to. Back in the day, factories not only put time, skill and intention into the blends they used to make shou, but they also piled the tea accordingly—stopping the artificial fermentation at a very specific point that suited the blend. Since the teas were only partially artificially fermented, they would actually age and change over time. In fact, you could brew a '70s or '80s shou for most beginners and fool them into thinking it is an aged sheng! Stopping the artificial fermentation at a specific point that is conducive to the quality of specific leaves/blends, however, requires a lot of skill. Most factories nowadays just let the fermentation process go the full forty-five to sixty days, essentially fully fermenting their shou puerh. This decreases the quality and also affects the way the tea changes over time. Our Tea of the Month is not like this, as we will discuss later on. For now, let's take a break, drink a few more cups and then turn to the important topic of ageability in shou puerh.

Aged & Aging Shou Puerh

The fermentation of puerh over time is a mysterious thing, and there is more about it that we don't understand than that we do, partly because there hasn't yet been enough research into this process (so we may eventually know more), and also partly because fermentation is a mystic phenomenon that we may never completely understand. Traditionally, tea warehouses (mostly in Hong Kong) didn't study the process of fermentation, or really participate in it in any way,

because the tea was very cheap. They really just installed shelves and left the tea alone. Nowadays, the value of puerh has meant that puerh merchants and consumers alike are much more interested in storing their tea carefully, intentionally and with more informed care, since the initial investment is so much higher. We will put some more articles on aging puerh in the Further Readings section for this month (on our blog), but for now we will discuss the part of puerh aging that we know the most about: humidity.

Puerh tea needs humidity to age, and the closer to the place where the microbial colonies come from the better, which is to say Yunnan. It is best if the humidity never drops below sixty percent (seventy is a good number to hover near). The issue is complicated, though, by seasonal variation. Usually, the springs in Southeast Asia are wet, so the tea absorbs a lot of moisture; then the hot summers induce fermentation, the autumns are then a buffer and the winters let the tea dry out. Different places have very different storage profiles, though, and tea lovers will often prefer one or the other. Malaysia, for example, has less variation and therefore makes for smoother, more consistent storage that a lover of Taiwanese storage may argue is more uniform and shallow, lacking character. But a lover of Malaysian storage would argue the very opposite, of course—that stability equals quality.

There is no doubt that sheng puerh ages better and more dramatically than shou, and is therefore always more worthwhile to age if space is limited and you have to choose which one to age, but shou is also worth aging, though with different criteria in mind. As our previous section clearly highlighted, the first and most important factor in determining whether and how to age a shou puerh is the degree of artificial fermentation, which means you have to taste various shou teas and learn to distinguish the degree of piling in the production process, which will then help you determine whether or not and how you will age that shou.

Our Tea of the Month, Old-Town Gathering, will be helpful in that journey, as it is partially fermented. When shou is new, you can tell the degree of fermentation by looking at the leaves, which will show the fermentation in shape, color and smell. You can also taste the tea, of course, starting your education by focusing on the thickness of the shou liquor and then measuring the degree of a certain "piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味)," which is caused by ammonia and other gases that are released under the thermal blankets. Most people describe this flavor as "pondy," referring to the fact that it kind of tastes like pond water, which is to say stagnant, musty and murky. Shou with a lighter or medium degree of artificial fermentation will still have a bite that lasts in the mouth, hinting at the astringency and bitterness of sheng puerh. Fully fermented teas will be thicker and have a piling flavor. When the fermentation is heavy like this, it is also much more difficult to control the fermentation and unwanted flavors are usually present in the tea. And, as we said, knowing the degree of artificial fermentation is the first and most important aspect of aging shou tea.

Of course, the old shou puerh teas that were all partially fermented are always worth further aging, as they change much like sheng, though to a lesser degree. (They are limited in the same ways that a "traditional" Hong Kong wet-storage tea would be.) Lightly fermented shou is often not nice, so we are usually looking for teas of medium fermentation, like our Tea of the Month, for this category. These are candidates for long-term shou storage. They will grow richer, darker and deeper than other shou teas, and you don't have to store them as long as a sheng. They will reach a very nice maturity in fifteen to thirty years (hitting nice plateaus at ten, fifteen, twenty and thirty, which are all worth drinking), combining the aged Chinese medicine, plum and sandalwood flavors of vintage sheng with the billowy, creamy earthiness of a nice shou.

These partially fermented shou teas are the ideal candidates for aging. They require the same storage parameters as sheng, which means a humidity of at least sixty percent. It is, however, important that you keep your shou and sheng teas separate for aging. Actually, we recommend keeping shou tea away from *all* other kinds of tea, as it is notorious for influencing the aroma of any nearby tea, especially your young sheng cakes.

The more common, fully fermented shou that we see nowadays is not really a candidate for long-term storage. This doesn't mean that it isn't worth aging these teas if you have the space. But space is *always* an issue when it comes to aging teas. We all have limited room for long-term storage, and therefore have to choose wisely, as each and every tea we age for decades is a large investment in time, energy and space. Fully-fermented shou teas don't really age—they just mellow out. The ammonia taste/pondy-ness decreases as the tea becomes mellower, softer and slightly thinner. This doesn't usually take very long; it can be achieved in five to ten years. The best method for this is to store the tea in a dry place, as it was essentially created in a very, very wet environment. (Not completely dry, but dry for puerh, like 40-50% humidity.) Letting such tea dry and mellow out will decrease the thickness, resulting in a pleasant, well-rounded brew without any piling flavors.

茶 ***Shou cakes are typically dried in warm warehouses like this. Factories use fans and heaters nowadays. Traditionally, sheng cakes would have been sun-dried and shou cakes dried like this in naturally warm rooms on shelves. This is a large production, but this old photo was taken in the early 2000s on one of Wu De's trips to Yunnan, so the tea was clean and delicious.***

魅力無限熟普洱

Appreciating Shou Puerh

Our tea is starting to thin out, getting lighter by the cup, but before we go let's finish this last kettle and use a few steepings to talk about the terms of appreciation used for shou puerh. This is a list of the categories that is sent to us along with one of the shou reviews we do for a Chinese magazine. We rank the teas from one to hundred in each of these characteristics. But we aren't describing them here because they represent some kind of authoritative consensus on what makes a fine shou tea, or because they are published by a well-known Chinese tea magazine, but because we honestly believe that these qualities are a very good place to start your shou education. If you use these terms to evaluate our Tea of the Month, as well as any other shou you encounter in your tea journey, you'll start to develop a helpful vocabulary for understanding quality in this genre of tea. When it comes to evaluating tea in general, the Ten Qualities of a Fine Tea are also helpful (we'll add them to the Further Readings for this month).

After you learn to distinguish and articulate these qualities while drinking different shou teas, you will then have to ask yourself the more difficult question of whether or not you actually enjoy all of them. Why did other tea lovers choose these criteria to evaluate shou tea? And, do I also think that these characteristics define quality when it comes to my own appreciation of shou puerh? Would I add to or replace any of these criteria and why? (As an example, the last criterion, Qi, is our own, and not on the form the magazine gives us. Maybe you could also try to add some categories of your own.) Let us know what you think in the discussions on our website or through social media!

-茶道-

Flavor/Aroma (*wei dao*, 味道/*xiang qi*, 香氣): Shou puerh should be earthy, loamy and yet clean. It often tastes of mushrooms, wild forests, leather or tobacco, Chinese herbs or sandalwood if it is aged. The liquor should be clean, without any murkiness. The flavors should be pleasantly complex, full-bodied and long-lasting. Shou should be dark, rich and remind you of long hikes through an autumn forest, the leaves fermenting along the paths you tread. This is the most subjective of the criteria we use to evaluate shou, as flavor is often based on our memories and personal preferences.

Thickness (*hou du*, 厚度): Fine shou is thick. The best shou teas are creamy, milky and oily—coating the mouth and throat. In the first few steepings, you should be able to see the thickness by appearance alone. If you pass the liquor between two porcelain cups, you can see the thickness, as the tea clings to the sides of the cup and spreads like milk. "Viscosity" would be another way of translating this quality.

Smoothness (*hua du*, 滑度): Smoothness is the most important characteristic for evaluating any tea. Fine tea should be smooth in your mouth, comfortable and clean. It should roll back smoothly and go down smoothly, without any pinch in the throat. The tea shouldn't bite anywhere, or leave an impression of roughness on the palate, tongue or throat. Try rolling the tea around your mouth to see if it stays together or comes apart in your mouth.

Mellowness (*chun du*, 醇度): This criterion has everything to do with the "piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味)" we discussed earlier. "Mellowness" is the opposite of this pondy, ammonia kind of flavor. Mellowness also means the shou is free of any off-putting flavors or sensations due to improper piling—musty, funky or fermentation flavors. A mellow shou is clean and billowy, like clouds in the mouth. It should be soft and subtle without any unnecessary flavors.

***Hui Gan* (回甘):** This tea term is often misunderstood—even by Chinese. It is a very specific kind of jargon, so it should come as no surprise that people without experience in tea are often confused about it, the way a layman may use scientific jargon inappropriately. Some people think this term has to do with sweetness, but that is actually another term (*hui tian*, 回甜). "*Gan*" refers to a minty, cool sensation in the mouth, like after sucking a peppermint, brushing your teeth or breathing outdoors on a cold winter day. The Chinese traditionally found this sensation quite pleasant. "*Hui*" literally means, "to remember." It refers to when the sensation of *gan* lingers on the breath after swallowing the tea. If you haven't yet sensitized yourself to *gan*, try blowing out an O-shaped mouth after swallowing the tea to see if a nice wintery, mintiness is lingering on your breath and then ask yourself if you find this sensation to be pleasant. You may notice that this sensation makes you feel like you've cleansed the palate, which is why characters in old Chinese novels always drink tea after meals.

Qi (氣): Qi can also be tricky, as talking about the Qi of a tea gives you the impression that you are in some kind of solid state and the tea is traveling through you. Actually, once you swallow the tea, it is *you* that moves—your body is moving. Also, some people mistake gross sensations such as heat or a caffeine rush to be Qi. When we speak about Qi, we are talking about where and how the tea enters the subtle body, the movement of that energy. In general, a shou tea should enter the subtle body through the chest and cause gross sensations like warmth and an overall sense of ease, relaxation and comfort, like slipping into a nice bath. Try breathing deeply and focusing on the palms of your hands, which are the most sensitive parts of your body. Notice any subtle sensations there. Close your eyes and try to feel the subtle movement of energy through your body. A meditation practice will help tremendously in cultivating this sensitivity over time. Look for real, physical sensations akin to tingling or prickles and then focus on other areas of the body.

Old-Town Gathering

The classic shou cakes that became the paragon of the genre throughout the 1970s and 1980s were medium-fermented by Menghai factory, using raw material from the Menghai area—so much so that you will still hear some old timers refer to fine shou as having "that classic Menghai taste." Old-Town Gathering wasn't made by Menghai factory, but it is a tribute to that era, using organic Menghai leaves in a medium-fermentation piling that was controlled with skill and stopped at the appropriate time to suit this grade of leaves.

In our discussion so far we haven't mentioned grades, which refer to the average leaf size used to make a puerh tea. Grades were traditionally much more relevant in shou production, especially for loose-leaf shou teas like Old-Town Gathering. Grades were measured one to nine, with one consisting of smaller buds being and grade eight or nine being mostly large, so-called "summer leaves," which have been on the tree much longer. Our Tea of the Month is all "*te ji* (特級)" or "special quality" leaves, which are grade two (averaged to that size, which means some are larger as well)—slightly larger than the smallest, sweetest buds, which are sometimes referred to as "*gong ting* (宮廷)." Having lots of buds is sometimes called "tippy" in the tea world. In shou puerh, tippy tea helps sweeten and thicken the brew, resulting in a deep, dark and rich cup.

Old-Town Gathering was harvested in the spring of 2014 and piled a few months later. It represents an exception to the three trends we discussed, which have caused a drop in the quality of recent shou production: it comes from nice, organic raw material, was intentionally produced as loose-leaf shou puerh and was piled to a very specific degree that suits the nature of the leaves/blend used. Having exceptions to the rule is what Global Tea Hut education is all about, after all! Such intentionally produced, organic shou puerh teas are growing rarer and rarer these days.

Since Old-Town Gathering was only partially fermented to a degree that suits this tea, it is also a great candidate for aging. We also like the sheng notes, especially in the aftertaste. They help solidify the energy of the tea, making Old-Town Gathering an even more grounding shou puerh than what you are used to. The thick and sweet buds and partial artificial fermentation/piling of Old-Town Gathering mean that the tea still has a sheng bite, preserving some of the Qi from the trees. As Master Lu often tells us, "Processing the bitterness out of tea is trying to remove its wisdom and nature, like trying to process the suffering out of life. Better to learn to appreciate it and let its wisdom fill you up."

It brews up a thick and creamy-dreamy liquor that is heavy and rich, filling you with warm and flowing Qi that changes a winter day to summer friendliness. Despite the kick, the two years of aging have smoothed and mellowed this tea out, though it would also respond to ten more years of aging very well indeed. This is amongst our favorite kind of shou, and in fifteen years may very well be not just amongst our favorite kind, but our favorite! Have an amazing shou-filled session this month and be sure to raise a cup or a bowl to celebrate the five-year anniversary of this Global Tea Hut!

Gongfu brewing

Sidehandle brewing

Water: *spring water, gathered or bottled*
Fire: *coals or infrared*
Heat: *hot; fish-eye; just before a full boil*
Brewing Methods: *gongfu or sidehandle*
Steeping: *1 long, 2 flashes, then growing.*
Patience: *30-40 steepings*

茶 Focus on heat this month. With a shou like this, temperature will help you get the most out of your tea.

Brewing Tips

As with our December tea, heat is going to be very important for the depth and patience that can take this tea to its full potential. Do you remember the principles we discussed in our second gongfu video last month? Wu De explained that if the temperature remains the same from kettle to cup, and if our movements are slow, gentle and graceful, then we steal the essence of the tea.

To get the most out of a tea like this one, we need deep heat from boiling water. This will make for more creamy, oily and rich shou puerh. It's also okay to use a bit more leaf than you're used to for the same reason (just a bit more, don't overdo it). Shou puerh is nice when it is extra-dark and thick, especially at this time of year. (We've added a few extra grams to your tins this month for this reason.)

Keeping the temperature consistent from kettle to cup is really impossible, but it helps to aspire to impossible ideals, as that keeps us improving all throughout our lives. Try to ask yourself if you can think of some ways to preserve temperature throughout the brewing process.

Gentle and graceful movements that disturb the tea as little as possible are something we can work on for decades. Practice keeping circular movements towards the center, and making sure that your arms are both loose, comfortable and open. We want the Qi to flow smoothly from shoulder to wrist, without any kinks anywhere. See if you can sense any disturbances in the tea liquor when your movements aren't graceful, and what effect that has on the brew in the cups. Then, practice a smoother flow…