


TEA OF THE MONTH

 ver the course of this month we will be steeped more thoroughly in a rich, creamy and dark brew of shou—darker than we have ever brewed it, in fact! To celebrate one of the best shou teas we have ever had, “Spirit (神),” which is our Tea of the Month and one of our Light Meets Life fundraiser cakes, we are going to explore this exciting genre of tea more deeply than ever before, exploring shou puerh history, production and preparation in even greater detail. We have gathered a huge collection of shou information, once again offering one of the most comprehensive guides to the topic ever published in the English language! For this Tea of the Month introduction, we plan to review the basics of shou processing, with a focus on the skills needed to make fine shou tea, introduce the history of shou, and finally, discuss aged and aging shou puerh.

Let’s start with the basics of puerh. To begin with, we have to start by dividing puerh into “sheng (生)” and “shou (熟).” “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” and “shou” are used in Chinese to discuss food as well, referring to “raw/uncooked” versus “cooked” meals. The terms also

describe the ripening of fruit. Understanding this distinction is important for exploring puerh, and specifically shou puerh, more deeply.

In order to better understand tea processing, we also have to return to a review of oxidation and fermentation. Oxidation is an enzymatic process: basically, cellular breakdown due, of course, to the exposure to oxygen, like when a banana or apple turns brown on the counter. Fermentation is similar, but it 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 in 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 (aging) or artificially fermented in the factory, as with shou. Over time, puerh both oxidizes and ferments. These natural changes are more pronounced in sheng than shou. But we’ll get to the aging of shou in a bit.

Like many genres of tea, puerh starts with “*maocha* (毛茶),” which means “rough” or “unfinished” tea. You’ll hear this term discussed most often with regards to the genres of oolong and puerh, as they traditionally

have “finishing” steps that occur later and sometimes at a different location from where the tea is initially processed. In puerh, 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 the farm, they were still done at a later date (sometimes months later), so the term “*maocha*” was still relevant. In oolong, 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 because the farmers have to focus on finishing 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, they have little time to sleep, let alone finish the tea, which can be done later. These days, with regards to puerh, 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*, 殺青) 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. Puerh tea is then sun-dried, which is unique in tea.



Spirit (*Shen*, 神)



Mengku, Yunnan, China



2017 Old-Growth Shou Puerh



Lahu Aboriginals



~1,500 Meters





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. The sun-drying is what also separates puerh from most 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 the source, since the water and micro-ecology will be unique for each place, but that rare-

ly happens nowadays. 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 wrapped in stacks 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. 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. With compression and drying, it’s three months.

Shou piling actually happens in two phases, wet and dry. The first, wet-piling, is more a 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 20 cm). This is where the yeasts and molds become more active in the tea. If the tea is destined to be loose-leaf shou, then the tea 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, hot-

THE PROCESSING OF MAOCHA

採摘
Plucking

萎凋
Withering

殺青
De-enzyming

揉捻
Rolling

曬干
Sun-drying



THE PROCESSING OF SHOU

分級
Sorting

堆積
Piling
Artificial Fermentation

烘乾
Drying

蒸葉
Steaming

壓制成餅
Compression

裝箱包裝
Packaging

ter and deeper steaming than with other puerh, which affects 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, when it has matured to the desired age.

A Brief History of 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: 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” constitutions. Consequently, most tribes developed their own ways of artificially fermenting, roasting or boiling puerh to make it more palatable. 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 sub-genre, 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). We actually have a ‘60s shou brick here at the Center. Most 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.

Sheng puerh takes seventy years to reach full maturity. That 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 become 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, gaining 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 those days, the raw material used to make puerh was very inexpensive (especially compared to these days), so they didn’t mind such compromises. Factories wanted to speed this up even more, inspired

by the artificial fermentation that was already very established in the black tea industry of next-door Guangxi, which produces Liu Bao. Guangxi 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 varieties, trees and leaves of Yunnan are different from 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 Mao Tai alcohol in China are not reproducible elsewhere, despite many attempts to forge 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.

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 large-leaf Yunnanese puerh require a deeper pile, and the wetness perhaps was inspired by the “traditional” wet

storage—shou puerh is, in fact, the wettest of 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 sub-genre 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.

A Dying Art

In recent years, much of the skill and craft that goes into making fine shou puerh has been lost. Overall, the puerh market has gone through many changes over the last fifteen years.

Genres & Puerh

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 always arbitrary, ultimately, 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 artificial-

ly 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 much more quickly and clearly when we separate puerh as a seventh genre. And the fact that students of tea understand tea better and more expediently is all the argument we need for presenting the genres in this way! (This is an important review for tea lovers who wish to explore tea more deeply!)

七種類的茶

尊重最古老的茶



Sheng puerh has also changed a lot, which has affected shou puerh as well. As more and more tea lovers have started consuming young, green sheng puerh, the criteria for evaluating sheng puerh has changed: Back in the day, all sheng puerh was evaluated based on its candidacy for aging; its “age-ability,” in other words. But nowadays, more sheng is consumed young, which means tea lovers now evaluate it on its “drink-ability,” which, for us, is to say the Ten Qualities of a Fine Tea. And the two sets of criteria don’t always line up, meaning that a tea that is great for long-term aging is not necessarily great for drinking young, and vice versa. Many famous vintages of puerh, like Red Mark (紅印), were notoriously bitter when young. Usually, if a tea is to be aged long-term, it must be bitter and astringent, strong and vibrant. If a runner is already weakening five kilometers into a forty-two kilometer marathon, he probably won’t go the distance. This has all resulted in great changes to puerh production, as pro-

ducers move towards meeting a demand for drinkable young sheng tea. They have begun to process their puerh more like green tea (or sometimes even oolong, which we call “poolong”). Such tea may taste nice now, as it is fresh, but isn’t worth taking up valuable storage space.

The second influencing factor that has had a tremendous impact on sheng and shou production over the last decade is that the cost of quality *maocha* from nice trees has skyrocketed. Old-growth raw material is extremely rare and expensive, so the overall cost of cakes has gone through the roof, making it hard for tea lovers to age their own sheng. This change has also indirectly affected the production of shou, which is the main topic of our discussion.

As we discussed earlier, shou puerh is never as good as sheng. All things equal (the same raw material) the piling of the tea leaves takes away some of the essence. Sheng will always be stronger, cleaner and more vibrant—

filled with the energy of the mountain and forest the tea came from. Also, natural fermentation and oxidation that happens slowly over time breaks the cells down in a much more gentle, smooth and clean way, as opposed to piling and covering with a wet blanket, which creates heat and moisture, forcefully composting the tea in a short period of time. Shou and sheng are apples and oranges: you cannot use the same criteria to evaluate them, as they are very distinct categories of puerh tea. But, once again, all things equal, sheng is better, which is why it is much more expensive than shou. The difference in quality is reflected in the market price, in other words. And that is as it should be. Sheng cakes are much more expensive than shou, especially if the tea is from good trees.

The quality of puerh tea is measured differently from other genres of tea. Most tea is qualified by some ratio between the *terroir*/garden/trees and the processing skills of the producer: leaves and processing, in other words.



Puerh, on the other hand, is evaluated by the mountain and its reputation (sometimes warranted; other times, partly hype), the kind of garden and the age of the trees. Since the cost of good *maocha* from nice mountains, gardens and older trees is so high, if a producer tried to create a shou tea from this material, she would have to sell it for the same price as the sheng cake, which very few customers would pay. In fact, she may have to sell it for more, since, as we discussed with regards to shou processing, shou has an extra piling step in post-production and can, therefore, be even more expensive, as a result of the extra labor costs. Also, there is a genuine loss of quality that happens through the piling, which is hard to justify when the raw material is so rare and expensive.

The end result of all these changes is that there is very little shou puerh intentionally produced these days. Most shou is just a blend of plantation tea grown and produced cheaply. Even if it does come from slightly better gardens, it is still often just the leftovers of whatever sheng puerh didn't sell that

year or from the previous year. These trends have further widened the gap between the quality of sheng and shou. Very few producers start out with a desire to create a shou cake, let alone the skills to execute—though there are exceptions, like our Tea of the Month.

The Gongfu of Shou

There are three main skills that go into the production of a fine shou puerh, which are unfortunately becoming rarer, as they aren't passed down within factories anymore, as lower costs and increased productivity have become the aims of the larger factories, while smaller boutiques have focused their energies more and more on sheng puerh production. To make a nice shou puerh, the producer has to start with that aim: evaluating shou based on its own terms, with heart and soul bent on creating the best possible tea within those parameters. This means that rather than seeing shou puerh as a second-class citizen, one needs to stop comparing it to sheng puerh al-

together. We know that we said over and over that, all things equal, sheng is better tea, but in terms of trying to create a beautiful shou, a comparison to sheng has no bearing. The producer should instead be focused on what makes a great shou tea, and on honing the skills needed to create one, which we will explore in this section.

The first and most important skill needed to make any fine puerh tea is selecting the leaves, which means sourcing good quality, clean, chemical-free tea from a nice mountain, a good garden and the oldest trees possible. Finding organic shou puerh has also become more difficult, as factories resort to using more plantation tea and/or blending lots of tea together in the piling. Back in the day, *maocha* was very cheap, so the factories could really focus on creating fine shou tea as a separate endeavor from sheng, following its own criteria. They knew a lot more about which kinds of leaves, blended or not, result in nice, creamy, rich and delicious shou puerh. Sourcing good raw material forms the basis of all fine tea.



The second skill needed to create fine shou puerh is to add starters from previous batches to the piling. This creates long-term bacteria strains, much like sourdough cultures, which can potentially be passed down for centuries. In the '70s and '80s, factories had strains for certain blends/kinds of raw material, which were passed from batch to batch, creating the ideal fermentation for each kind of tea. The microbes can be added as a starter in three ways: Firstly, the producers can add "slur," which is the dark water that runs off the piles after they are sprayed, covered and fermented. This thick liquid is full of microbes. Secondly, they can also add the microbe-dense balls, called "*cha tou* (茶頭)" that form at the bottom of piles due to the heat and pressure. Traditionally, there were fewer *cha tou* due to more skillful stirring of the piles, but it is impossible to prevent them from forming at all, and they make a great starter for future batches. Finally, microbes can be added as a starter by simply saving some of the wet leaves from one batch and adding them to

the next. The preservation of certain colonies of microbes for certain types/blends of raw material (*maocha*), improving over time, creates the best fermentation. After all, it is the microbes that are doing all the work in making shou tea, and so a healthy colony will, of course, result in a better tea. If the microbial colonies are off in any way, the tea will also have off flavors, as with any fermented product in the world.

The third skill needed to create fine shou is the skillful management of the piling process itself. This starts with knowing how much water to add, when to stir the leaves and how often, as well as when to add or remove the thermal blanket, depending on the ambient temperature. More importantly, skillful piling is about understanding the desired degree of fermentation relative to the leaves being piled. Different blends/types of leaves need to be piled to a different degree. Nowadays, as fewer producers focus on shou puerh, these skills are being lost (except the skill of recognizing when shou is completely fermented, though some factories have lost even that, going be-

yond the time the tea is as fermented as it can be). It is much easier to fully ferment the tea for forty-five to sixty days, no matter what kind of leaves are used. However, this is not ideal for fine shou. The best shou teas are fermented more lightly than this, and are stopped intentionally at a precise degree of fermentation that is ideal for the type of tea being piled. As we discussed earlier (more than once), shou is lower quality than sheng (again, all things equal), because the piling process alters the tea, and some of the natural purity of the old trees and the mountain forest where the tea grew is lost as a result of this processing. Obviously, if the fermentation is done to a lesser degree, these changes are also less aggressive, preserving more of the natural essence of the tea. Knowing when and how to stop the piling is a skill that requires a deep understanding of different types of leaves, as well as knowledge and experience with fermentation. As with all stages in tea production, piling should enhance the tea and leave no trace, so the best piling should not result in a piling flavor.





Appreciating Shou Puerh

珍賞熟茶

Flavor (*wei dao*, 味道/*xiang qi*, 香氣): Shou puerh should be earthy, loamy and yet clean. If it is aged, it often tastes of mushrooms, wild forests, leather or tobacco, Chinese herbs or sandalwood. The liquor should be clean, without any murkiness. The flavors should be pleasantly complex, full-bodied and long-lasting. Shou should be dark and 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 just 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” is another way of saying this.

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 criteria has everything to do with “piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味),” caused by fully-fermenting the tea. “Mellowness” is the opposite of this pindy, 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 or outlying flavors.

Hui Gan (回甘): This tea term is often misunderstood—even by Chinese people. 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 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. Chinese people 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 of an O-shaped mouth after swallowing the tea to see if a nice wintry mintiness is lingering on your breath, and then ask yourself if you find this sensation to be pleasant.

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 like 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.

AGED & AGING SHOU PUERH

Many shou puerh teas from the '70s and '80s would taste like an aged sheng to the inexperienced puerh drinker, because tea sellers knew that many of their customers would age the shou tea. Since the blends were intentionally produced using fine-quality raw material, and then artificially fermented to a much lesser degree, the newly produced shou tea was still "green," especially compared to all the fully-fermented shou puerh teas sold these days. This meant that the tea still had room to naturally ferment. It was worth storing these teas long-term, in other words, as they would grow and change over time—fermenting and oxidizing like a sheng, only to a lesser degree. And this is the main factor in storing shou puerh even today.

To properly store shou puerh, a tea lover should learn to recognize the degree of fermentation used. Ideally, one would have access to fine shou puerh, produced using the three skills we discussed earlier (like our Tea of the Month, for example), but that may not always be possible. Fully-fermented puerh is often "pondy," tasting of ammonia or pond water, due to the long, aggressive piling process, which results in the production of many gases as the tea is forcefully composted over forty-five to sixty days. Such tea is not suitable for long-term storage. Since it was already artificially fermented to a high degree, there isn't much room for it to change over the long haul. There is little left in the leaves for natural fermentation and oxidation slowly over time, in other words. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't age fully-fermented shou.

The best option for most of the fully-fermented shou teas is to mellow them out. "Mellowing" is so relevant in today's puerh world, full of such shou, that it is even a criteria of all the shou tea reviews we conduct for various tea magazines. Of course, one should start with organic, clean shou, even if it is piled unskillfully. Then, you age it for around ten to fifteen years. There is no point in going beyond this. Ten or fifteen years is enough to mellow out the tea, which means that it loses the

pondy, "piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味)" it had when it was young. It will become smoother, thicker, creamier and gentler as well. The aggressive piling of most shou puerh teas makes them rough, so mellowing them out will result in a much more enjoyable tea liquor.

If you find intentionally-produced shou puerh that is artificially fermented to a proper degree, then you will have found a candidate for long-term storage. Such tea will grow finer and finer over time—the older, the better, in fact. Our Tea of the Month fits into this category, and so does Inner Path, which some of you will remember. (It would be great if everyone shared some more examples on the Global Tea Hut app this month!)

Whichever kind of shou you are storing, it should be stored like all other teas: in a cool, dark place that is clean and free of aromas. For that reason, the kitchen is always the worst place to store any tea, as the air is full of oils, spices and other smells. Find a nice, quiet place that is consistent in temperature and is dark. Puerh needs some humidity and airflow, which most other teas do not. A fluctuating humidity that rises and drops seasonally is ideal, with a minimum of 60% humidity, which is the low end for puerh (this means indoor humidity, not based on an outdoor hygrometer).

It is important to keep shou puerh away from all other kinds of tea. The strong piling/artificial fermentation aromas of shou puerh are notoriously detrimental to all other kinds of tea, especially delicate teas like green, white, yellow or young sheng puerh. Shou should have a cabinet all to itself, kept clean and apart from all other teas, though you can store both kinds of shou together—those you are storing long-term and those you are mellowing out.

The more puerh stored together, the better—a warehouse will produce way better tea than a few cakes in a cabinet. Traditionally, we store all puerh as at least a "*tong* (筒)," which is seven cakes wrapped in bamboo skin and an extra cake left loose (eight cakes

in total). The bamboo skin protects the seven cakes in the *tong*. The extra cake is for tasting over time. Tea aged in a whole, unbroken cake is way better for the long run, and when it is time to drink a tea, breaking the cake up completely and storing the pieces in a jar for at least a month will result in a much better liquor. After a long period of storage, this is important, since the center of the cake has not been exposed to any oxygen throughout that time. Breaking a cake up makes for more even, smoother tea. This is why we need the "tester" cake: to determine when it is time to dig into a tea (when it has aged enough). Then we can break a whole cake up and store it in a jar for consumption, carefully closing up the *tong* to protect the six remaining cakes, and so on, until the tea is gone...

✱ *This is a 1965 shou brick produced by the Kunming Tea Factory. It is evidence that they were experimenting with piling and other techniques of artificial fermentation long before they were licensed to sell the tea in 1973. The brick came from a retired, old puerhian, who got it from an employee in the late 1970s and kept it ever since.*

老和熟成熟茶



茶 Spirit 神

Our Tea of the Month is part of our Holistic Healing Cakes series for this year's Light Meets Life fundraiser, which are each created for the three energies that make up the human being, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine: Jing (精), Qi (氣) and Shen (神). This is the Shen cake, representing the spirit. It is the most cosmic of the three, connecting you to the Celestial energy that brings perspective and balance to a healthy life.

Spirit is one of the best shou teas we have ever had. It comes from an organic garden in Mengku (勐庫). That tea was sheng *maocha*, whereas this tea has been piled. It is a good garden, with some old-growth trees. It is an eco-arboreal garden, which we define as the gardens nearer to the village, which aren't as good as forest gardens, but are still certified organic, bio-diverse, often have old trees and are an example of village farmers and Nature working together cooperatively.

This tea is also a great example of all the principles we have been discussing for how to create a great shou tea. It was intentionally produced—we chose this tea specifically, as it is an affordable *maocha* from a nice garden. This already makes it extremely rare in the world of shou tea. It was then piled with the introduction of microbes from previous pilings, and done so to a very specific degree: We wanted to maintain as much of the essence of these beautiful trees, leaves and environment in the finished tea as possible, so we requested that the piling be light. Overall, this tea was piled for around twenty-five days, which is much less than the fully-fermented cycles of forty-five to sixty days that most tea producers are following. This means that the tea is still slightly green, especially around the edges. The skillful piling means that there is no “piling flavor (*dui wei*, 堆味),” even though it is a new shou puerh.

This also means that Spirit is a great candidate for long-term storage. It won't just mellow out like fully-fermented shou, losing the piony piling flavors, but it will actually age and change like a sheng puerh, only to a lesser extent. It will grow deeper and develop all the wonderful flavors and aromas of aged puerh that we know and love, like Chinese herbs, plums, ginseng and that “ancient places” aroma. We are excited to store this tea as a community and taste it throughout its journey.

Spirit is a deep and powerful shou. It draws you inward and connects you to the natural wisdom in your heart. We have found it to be calming, with both earthy flavors and energy. It is dark and rich, with a lessened, though still very present, vibrancy, like you get from a young sheng. We love the flavor, smoothness and Qi of this tea, along with its future potential to become something absolutely extraordinary. As you drink this tea, bowl by bowl or cup by cup, you will find a deep warmth radiating from within. The Chinese say that when the Shen, the Spirit, descends to the heart, the eyes light up, which is why tea is said to “brighten the eyes (明目).” And this tea does brighten the eyes in a very powerful way, changing the world, or at least the way you see it!



Sidehandle

Gongfu

Water: spring water or best bottled
Fire: coals, infrared or gas
Heat: as hot as possible, fish-eye, 95° C
Brewing Methods: sidehandle or gongfu (they make different brews)
Steeping: longer, flash, flash, then growing (you can get three flashes as well)
Patience: thirty steepings

茶 Heat is going to be the most essential aspect of brewing this tea well. Crinkled up, fermented leaves need strong fire to penetrate the leaves' cells and elicit the essence.

Brewing Tips

熟茶最佳讚賞是深黑和濃郁

Shou tea is much better appreciated dark and strong. This means you should use slightly more leaves than you are used to, and/or steep the tea for longer. Shou puerh is nice when it is thick, dark and creamy. It should have the consistency of milk. Since this tea wasn't fermented as long as most shou teas, however, you may want to use fewer leaves than you normally do when brewing shou puerh—more leaves than other teas and fewer than most shou puerh, in other words.

Ideally, this tea should be brewed gongfu or as sidehandle bowl tea. (You can use the Sidehandle Ceremony Guide from last month's issue.) Temperature will play a very important role in preparing this month's tea well. Shou tea, black tea and aged sheng puerh are the kinds of tea that require the most heat, in fact. The leaves are crumpled from the aging and/or artificial fermentation and the cells have all collapsed on themselves. We need a deep, penetrating heat to draw the essence from such leaves. Also, the liquor of such teas is complex and rich, and we therefore want the tea to be as full-bodied and deep as possible. The liquor should be black in the very center, moving into brown, then maroon, and finally, have a golden ring around the edge of the cup or bowl. You should taste many flavors in these teas, from earthiness to Chinese herbs, sweetness to mustiness.

The ideal would be to use charcoal for this tea. Now is a great time to start your journey with charcoal, which means true fire, as opposed to just heat, if you have been thinking of lighting that fire. If not charcoal, we find that gas or infrared are best when heat is paramount, as it is with this month's tea. Charcoal fire also includes a lot of infrared, and we have found that infrared stoves are the best option amongst the electrical choices. But nothing will ever substitute for real fire!

Since puerh like this enters the subtle body through the stomach and chest, shou puerh like this month's tea is best enjoyed in larger cups or bowls. It is better to take big drinks. Oolong, on the other hand, is delicate and enters the subtle body upwards through the nasal cavity, so it is better to drink from small cups and take the smallest sips possible. This month's tea, however, is for gulping. It is nice to have a big, full cup of piping, steaming hot shou puerh, especially if the weather is starting to get colder where you live.

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