

There is no genre(s) of tea more powerful, safe or healthy as that which has been aged. Much like wine, teas also improve with time, gathering and absorbing energy to them throughout their journey. Tea is a very absorbent plant, capable of taking on the flavors and smells of whatever is around it—be that flowers, camphor or any other scent imbued to the tea by man, or even the natural flavors of the place it has been stored, for better or worse. It isn't a stretch of the imagination, then, to accept that tea that has aged for years, decades or even centuries, has also gathered energy to it over that time.

The highest caliber teas in most any genre are those that have been aged. Through time, the tea leaves grow wiser, richer and more connected to the Spirit. We used to think that only Puerh teas could be aged, but that is wrong—any quality tea can be aged, increasing in power and presence over time. Green teas, because of their frying, which arrests oxidation, are considered best drunk when fresh, and one rarely has the opportunity to drink an old Green tea. However, we have had a forty-year-old and even one-hundred-year old Green tea. We were surprised to find that the tea had indeed improved, providing a deeper understanding of what is possible in fermentation. We think that Green teas just needs a bit longer, and perhaps do not age as well as other kinds of tea like Oolong or Puerh. Still, we would recommend enjoying most Green teas while they are fresh, as that is perhaps the time they might shine with the greatest glory.

Of course, we also enjoy many fresh Green, White, Yellow and Oolong teas. Some of them are exquisite and as beautiful an expression of Nature as any. However, buying older teas also usually ensures that they were manufactured at a time when most if not all tea was farmed organically, more in tune with Nature and the harmony of the mountains that they come from. While it is true that no tea ages as well as Puerh, we have also drunk several aged Oolongs and Rock Teas (yancha) that were equally powerful. It was vintage Puerh, however, that first connected us to the sense that there was something beyond pleasure, society and friendship in tea. Seeking out the spirit and essence of Cha Dao in this modern day, for most wayfarers, leads one to the wizened old leaves of vintage Puerh and Oolong.

No one knows how or why people began aging tea, realizing that it improved over time. Perhaps it was an accident, a result of simply trying some leaves that had been disregarded. Others suggest it was a result of the Tea Horse Caravans that carried Puerh tea from

Yunnan to other parts of China and beyond. Sometime in the Tang Dynasty the trade with Tibet motivated some entrepreneurial merchants to begin carrying compressed tea bricks by horse to sell to Tibetans. The success of the venture led others to follow suit, and there was soon a bustling coming and going of mule caravans that were sent all over China, even as far afield as Beijing. The tea was compressed to make transportation easier, and some scholars suggest that the humidity, sweat of the horses and distance would slightly ferment the tea; and then the consumers would recognize that the more fermented the tea was, the better the flavor and energy. This would lead to the storage of Puerh tea, like the cakes kept in monasteries in Tibet, recognized to have greater energy and even protective powers.

Not all tea sages agree with this idea, however. Some suggest that the storage of tea is a very ancient practice, perhaps dating back to the Daoist ascetics of the Zhou Dynasty and before. We also prefer such musings. We think that the ancient Daoist mendicants were far too sensitive to miss the affects fermentation has on tea. If they could discover the Leaf from a forest of other trees using such acumen, they could definitely recognize the difference storing it for some time had on its flavor and energy. It is hard to imagine that people who lived a life of tea would need to discover its aging process by accident. Furthermore, Puerh ages better when compressed and we believe that these tea sages surely knew that as well, which suggests that it wasn't just compressed for easier transportation.

There is a very real sense that cake teas ferment much better than teas in loose leaf, in part because of the microbes that get trapped inside the cakes during the damp steaming used to compress them. Some tea masters conclude that tea was first compressed because of this, and that tradition and convenience just carried on ancient wisdom. In fact, many factories producing Puerh tea in more modern ages might not even understand why they compress tea, other than as tradition. One of our teachers, Zhou Yu, discussed this topic at some length with us once:

*"I did my own experiment not so long ago with regards to this issue. (And I would remind you that experimenting yourself is always the best way to learn.) I kept some 2003 Yiwu tea in cakes and loose form. It was the same tea. I produced it myself. I wrapped the cakes in organic paper and then bamboo bark tongs. I put the loose leaf tea in a nice cardboard box with ventilation. Everyone here thought the loose leaf would ferment faster, but actually the cakes had more and better fermentation. Not only that, but the*



*compressed tea tasted better and had a much deeper energy (Qi). It's impossible to know if our ancestors understood this, or just compressed the tea for convenience. Perhaps it was both. Some of the swords forged in the Song Dynasty are made from metals we cannot recreate today, suggesting that the ancients had technology and understanding that has been lost. Masters passed techniques down to students or to their children, often without explanation, until things like this just become a part of tradition. I think most factories compress Puerh tea today just because that is the way it's done, the cultural tradition. However, we have found that the cakes all have better energy (Qi) and ferment better than loose leaf Puerh. The compression offers the perfect environment for the microbiotic activity that leads to decomposition. The steam used to compress the tea cakes is only partially dried out. It also cools gradually. The trapped moisture creates an ideal environment for the changes in the tea to occur. It also holds the spirit (Qi) in, making the old cakes much stronger."*

### **The energy (Qi) of these aged leaves**

One of the most amazing experiences of my life happened when my whole family came to visit me in Taiwan, including my very aged grandfather and great uncle. I took the whole group to see a tea master. The eight of them sat around the table chit-chatting

about how exotic the tea room was, with its walls and walls of tea, waterfalls and bonsai trees. Eventually, my teacher passed me a sly grin and reached behind him to a jar of very old Puerh tea. Brewing the deep and dark liquor—leaves ancient and wise, connected to the spirit of Nature—changed the entire atmosphere of the room. Within minutes, it was enshrouded in a deep and peaceful silence, only the waterfall singing in the background. For the next two hours, I sat with my entire family in complete quiet, connected to one another as never before. Never in my entire life prior to that day had my family and I ever sat in quiet; never had we been so close. My mother wept in joy, my grandfather cried too, saying later that he felt the presence of my then recently departed grandmother. The power that these aged teas can have—the life-changing presence and connection to the spirit of the Universe that they offer—became clearer to me than ever before. I share this experience, so personal, to show that one need not be a saint, a meditator or even a tea lover to experience the profundity that a tea ceremony steeped in the Dao has to offer.

To many it may seem almost like a fairy tale that those Daoist mystics cloudwalking around ancient China were able to find a sense of oneness, transcendence and connection to the universal energy when today people all over the world drink tea all the time and

28 never get close to those sensations. I think that vintage Puerh tea is the closest that we in this modern age will get to the spirit of the ancient forests tea once represented. There are many aspects of Cha Dao that make the leaves irrelevant, many of which we may discuss later, but there really aren't any leaves as powerful as aged Puerh—so as a “handful of leaves”, the Dao is much more aligned with the wise, old leaves gathered from the source of all tea, in Yunnan, and hand-processed in the simple, age-old ways that haven't changed for thousands of years.

One of the biggest differences between Puerh tea and other varieties is that it comes from “trees”; “old growth” in the way discussed above. And not just any trees, but the ancestors of the original kings of Yunnan, the source of all tea and Cha Dao on Earth. While it is possible for tea to grow into large trees in other parts of the world, not all varieties are capable of this. Some will only ever be bushes, and even if left alone can only grow to about the height of a man. And even those places that can nourish tea into trees, cannot do so with the same combination of perfect rain, sun, humidity, soil and water that Yunnan can. The trees there produce tea leaves like no others on Earth. They are, after all, living in the Eden of tea.

From the very first time I ever sipped a well-aged Puerh, I was deeply and affectionately in love,

body and soul. It was truly love at first sip. I had been drinking other kinds of tea for quite some time and was used to all the nuances in flavor and aroma that different kinds of tea offered, and yet nothing had prepared me for the way this tea would affect me. Puerh tea isn't just about the sense of smell and taste; it touches a person on a much deeper level. From the first few sessions, I felt like a character in an age-old plot, like the ones that filled my childhood story books, in which the main character blindly stumbles out of this world and into another that is equally vast, complicated and rich. And this new terrain offered deeper and more varied flavors and smells than any of the teas I had drank previously. What's more, Puerh created sensations in my mouth and throat that I had never experienced; it calmed and soothed my body, and forced me into a meditative state of quiet. I was very blessed that my first teachers were ones who recognized the importance of the energy (Qi) in tea: as a meditative tool, an aspect of health and well-being, and a support in one's mundane and spiritual life. I never knew that meditative silence with others could bring with it such sensual joys. Not only was I at peace mentally, but these old teas seemed to “intoxicate” my body with melodies of bliss I had never known. I very quickly grew to love everything about Puerh tea. It satisfied me on so many levels, and still does today.



The changes that occur in raw Puerh tea as it ages are amazing enough to be called miraculous. The flavor changes from a jerky astringency to a deep and woody liquor that often tastes of the earth and spices like sandalwood, with the occasional hint of orchid or the ever-famous plum aftertaste. The flavors coat the mouth and throat and linger on the breath for a long time. When one is drinking old Puerh, though, the impressions left by the flavors and aromas are soon forgotten, for Puerh is often a more corporeal experience. One begins to feel warm and comfortable, calm and at ease—one might say, “intoxicated”, but this is misleading as the mind remains clear, perhaps even sharper than usual. The experience of drinking aged teas, brewed by one steeped in the Dao, brings a connection to the universal energy of the moment, and with it life-changing transcendence. No words can prepare one for the first times tea touches us in this way, and everyone’s reaction may be different: some may laugh, some may cry. Talkers, no matter how loquacious, often find a silence that they don’t find so uncomfortable. I have seen all these reactions and more.

Puerh tea has been in history sometimes referred to as “living tea”. This is because of all the microbial activity that is going on in Puerh cakes, from newborn to ancient. These microscopic organisms are a big part of why the cellular breakdown of Puerh tea (fermentation) occurs more smoothly and uniquely from other kinds of age-able teas. They assist in the fermentation over time, and have a kind of symbiosis with the leaves. It might be strange to think that the leaves, no longer ‘living’ in a scientific sense, are benefiting from these organisms, but they definitely are from the perspective of the tea and its quality. Many tea doctors have written about the health benefits of Puerh tea, and some relate them to the microbial communities that inhabit the cakes. From a more spiritual perspective, it is amazing that even after the leaves are harvested from the tree, they remain alive for all the years they are kept in storage, as if those tiny beings were in fact sentient—growing in awareness and wisdom over time. Besides the idea that tea is very absorbent, this is one explanation that many teaists in Asia share for why Puerh tea increases in spirit over time. I have a tea brother that always calls the microscopic organisms in Puerh tea “midichlorians” after the tiny sentient beings in the Star Wars mythology—humorously asking me to take a “midichlorian count” of certain vintages. Seriously, though, it is an explanation for the variations in spirit and energy (Qi) that characterize different aged Puerh tea cakes.

People often ask me if there is a limit to the age a Puerh can be, and whether or not they do continue to get better as they get older and older. I have read some tea scholars who think that aged tea has a “peak”

time that it should be drunk, but my experience has often shown otherwise. Of course, the older a tea is the greater the chance that some improper storage occurred somewhere down the line, for storing tea isn’t simply a matter of tossing it on a shelf (nor is it as complicated, in my opinion, as some scholars would suggest). Each genre of aged tea has its own method and criteria for storage, though much of this is only starting to come to light in recent years, as more scientifically-minded collectors begin to study the storage of tea. Still, the best teas I have ever had were very old indeed, and none of their flavor, aroma or energy had dissipated from that time—on the contrary, as long as the storage was pretty good, the older the tea, the more powerful of an experience it was. I have drunk several Qing Dynasty Puerh teas, from 150, 180 and even 200+ years old. All of them had been stored in ceramic pots that had been unopened for most of that time. It should come as no surprise that they were more powerful even than the Antique Era teas from the first half of the twentieth century.

In the late 1800’s, two or three British explorers to Yunnan reported that the market was then full of some Tang Dynasty Puerh tea bricks that had been unearthed from an ancient storage room. The explorers said that though the bricks were slightly “musty” the Chinese all seemed very keen to get their hands on them. At that time, those bricks would have been more than a thousand years old, a testament to the amount of time tea can actually be kept.

There is a lot of debate in the modern Puerh world about what makes a good candidate for aging and then how to store the tea. Some say a tea should be strong and bitter, to the point of distastefulness, if it is to remain strong throughout its journey. Others argue that a tea that tastes bad now will only get worse, claiming that old junk only differs from new in age. The debate twirls and gets more and more complicated when we add the idea of “Wet” or “Dry Storage”. Basically, Puerh tea needs some amount of humidity in order to ferment over time, and most scholars suggest somewhere in between 70-85%. The places that it has traditionally been stored, however—Southern China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia—cycle through periods of lower and higher humidity, allowing the tea to absorb moisture in the Spring, heat up and actively ferment in the Summer, slowly dry and cool down in the Autumn and then “rest” in the Winter. Storing the tea in a “Wetter” way, then, would be to expose it to higher humidity levels so that the fermentation speeds up, and “Drier” to slow down the fermentation.

Some tea lovers argue that “Wet-stored” teas smell and taste musty and have lost all value. They advocate complete “Dry Storage”. One must question this thinking, though, since all the great vintages of the

30 past were at some point “Wet-stored”, depending on how one defines that term. If one’s interpretation of “Wet Storage” is an environment where the humidity exceeds the normal range discussed above, then most all teas stored in traditional areas and ways, which means almost 100% of all aged tea, passed through some period(s) of such higher humidity in their long lives, and those that didn’t were thus accidentally. Dry-storing teas is a very new trend, dating back arguably to 1988, but more wide-spread to the late nineties. Puerh tea wasn’t always such a commodity, with experts, collectors and their endless debates popping up like so many monsoon frogs. For a long time Puerh tea was just tea, and people didn’t take so much scientific care in the way they stored it. Of course, it did represent an investment to many tea shop or tea house owners so most of them didn’t just throw it on the ground, but neither did they analyze and scrutinize it over time. The changes that happen in Puerh tea happen naturally.

They say that some of the most-coveted vintages of Puerh tea, like Hong Yin or Lan Yin for example, tasted awful and astringent when they were newborn. The debate about how much and what changes occur in Puerh tea over time, the best cakes for potential storage and the qualities that make them as such, the proper methods of storage—all of it ends in the same place this discussion of a “handful of leaves” has returned to again and again, falling right in the lap of our own intuition and sensitivity. If by the “best candidate” for storage you mean the one that will yield the highest financial return for investment as some kind of collector’s item, go sift through the endless debates on forums and magazines. If by the best tea, you mean for drinking and being with Spirit, then follow your own intuition.

A lot of people ask me for an opinion on which tea will age best, and I always say I don’t really have an opinion on whether a potential cake should be strong and bitter or pleasant right now. I personally store both kinds. Nor do I wish to get too wrapped up in a discussion on storage methodology, as I have had awesome “Wet-stored” teas and atrocious “Dry-stored” ones and vice versa. As I leave such social gatherings, whether pleased by the conversation or not, tea again sloughs such intellectual baggage and returns to just so many leaves in water, my mind joyfully calm and at ease. Moreover, as all such debates are far from being settled, the answers remain as enshrouded in mystery as the first day people discovered the miracles that occur in the transformation of tea as it ages. I like it that way. I don’t want a science and method to the mystery.

The less intellectual my tea is, the more intuitive and sensory it becomes. Why not a bit of mystery and magic in the way teas change over time? Why not admit that we don’t know what degree of humidity is perfect, how the microbes function, the way the leaves

break down and change? Why not admit that, like life, there are too many variables to control? Similarly, I’m not sure I care to have a scientific explanation for some of the miracles I saw living and traveling through Asia this last decade. Scientists might one day find an explanation for why yogis don’t need sleep, why they can maintain their body temperature in extreme cold—they may explain the reason why Indians don’t get sick from the polluted waters of the holy Ganges, or why the lights appear in the sky above some Himalayan temples—scientists may even one day explain why teas change over time and how the process can be sterilized and perfected, but as such I don’t really care to hear any of it, as it is all no less miraculous because it can be explained. You can explain the muscular or even emotional logic behind a smile, but that doesn’t make it any less beautiful; is Michelangelo’s Pieta just a hunk of stone some guy chiseled five hundred or so years ago? Why not just shrug and enjoy some tea, recognizing the beauty and power in the natural changes that occur as it ages—changes that were going on in Puerh tea long before any collectors or experts started arguing about them. To me, the transformation of any tea over time, as it ages and grows in spirit and power, is nothing short of amazing.

Thinking about the powers of something so simple as some leaves in water—to bring such pleasure, joy, friendship, and even peace and transcendence to so many people through time and space is almost bewildering. And when you add to that the idea that those same leaves can be kept even thousands of years, transforming like people into better, wiser beings, I feel nothing shy of astonishment. To me, there is no greater treasure than a handful of such leaves, and no greater experience than sharing them with a friend.

“Come inside,”

The old Chajin said with a hand on my shoulder, “and let’s try to make a more beautiful world.”

