

SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TAIWANESE OOLONG

It helps to have a historical context for Taiwanese oolong in order to understand how it got to where it is today. The changes in production have been at least partially market-driven. The art and spirit of tea production is something that is more difficult to find the ink for, and better left in the experience of drinking a magical oolong like our Tea of the Month. We have tried to express as much of the poetry, mythology, folklore and spirit of oolong tea as we can. This should be balanced, however, with some linear science and historical facts to ground our understanding of Taiwanese oolong, leaving us with a deeper and more holistic comprehension of this magical tea.



In the following section, we are going to explore the history of Taiwanese oolong from a linear orientation, focusing on the facts, the market, the people and events that are known to have shaped the direction of Taiwanese oolong, as well as the changes in production methodology over time. Again, we like a balanced, rounded approach to understanding tea. A good example of healthy and whole comprehension is how Ruan Yi Ming presents us with a very dry and factual account of how Eastern Beauty came about in the following section, while later in this issue (in the next section, called “Organic Farmers of the North”) we will read the legendary, poetic story of Eastern Beauty’s creation. Neither is more true or deeper. A tea lover is a *lover*, and a lover strives to know his or her beloved on every level: intellectual, historical, spiritual and creative through the art of tea.

It is important to start this tour through the history of Taiwanese oolong with a basic understanding of early oolong production, which, as we’ve mentioned, followed the same steps for centuries. There were of course different production methods to suit different varieties, but the general steps in traditional oolong production continue today. This basic formula for traditional oolong production is worth studying and learning, as it will form the basis for a deeper understanding of all types of oolong production. We covered the basic steps in the introductory article. They are summarized on pg. 23 of this issue. You should learn them before

traveling onwards. While knowing the basic stages in oolong production is great, we must remember that the master farmer is working on much more subtle levels than these basic steps. When we first start brewing tea, we learn to put some tea in a pot and steep it for so long, but those generalities quickly vanish as we move to subtler and subtler distinctions as our skill and sensitivity increase—what kind of clay, what size and shape of pot, which water, which fire, and so on. In the same way, each of these basic steps is full of infinite subtleties to the oolong master.

So far, we’ve learned how to categorize Taiwanese tea by processing method, which most basically is divided into the shape of the dried tea leaf: striped or ball-shaped. Then we learned the main varieties of tea trees in Taiwan and which type of tea they were traditionally used to make, like *Ching shin* for high-mountain oolong and *Baozhong*, and *Ching shin da mo* for Eastern Beauty and *Dong Ding*.

In the next article, Master He Jian gives us a clear, brief and very elegant summary of each kind of Taiwanese oolong, as well as how they have lost some of the traditional art and craftsmanship over the years. In the following article, Ruan Yi Ming dives deeper into the processing of Taiwanese oolong through historical records and experience.

Before moving on to a historical survey of oolong tea in Taiwan, we thought that you’d like some advice about aged and aging Taiwanese oolong. It is a question we get asked about a lot.