

Gongfu Tea Tips

SPACE OR FULLNESS IN THE POT

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Alongside another important gongfu tea experiment, Sam brings up an amazing point in this issue: We have to find the right balance between enjoying tea and improving our art: too much relaxing and enjoying tea and we don't get better, growing lazy over time, and too much focus and we get tight and lose the relaxation and joy that is at the heart of all tea appreciation.

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Almost two years ago, on the annual Global Tea Hut trip to Wuyi, I remember Master Lin mentioning that we should only fill our gongfu teapot 80% with water. This stuck with me for some reason. It didn't make sense. Why would we only fill the pot 80%—surely this would decrease the temperature of the water? When I asked Wu De about it, he told me that Master Lin always insisted that his students do the experiment before discussing the results. He also confused me by saying that some of our teapots here are exceptions to the rule. It sounded too advanced, so I put it into the “I'll get around to it later” pile, which only ever seems to grow in my case. While I was brewing tea alone I did fill the pot up one steeping and then put a little less in the next to see if I'd notice the difference, but that was too unstructured and so inconclusive. Recently, I took a course on videography and the lecturer mentioned that he had taken all his lenses and tested the sharpest focal point for each one, spending hours taking photos of soda cans. This struck a nerve in me, as this person was really committed to his art, taking the time to do long and tedious experiments that would help him excel in his craft. His devotion was inspiring to me. Shouldn't I be that committed to my tea practice?

This month's gongfu experiment was another great reminder for me to cultivate the right attitude. Wu De forced me to do the experiment myself. In Zen there is the saying, “Kill the teacher,” meaning you cannot rely on your teacher for your growth. Tea, or any spiritual practice, art or discipline, is not just about intellectually knowing how to do something but about the experience of it. Part of us always wants the easiest path, the work already done, the package neatly wrapped. Waiting for this to happen expends time we could be using to find out the answers for ourselves! Wu De often says that if a student only reaches the same level as their teacher they are half their teacher. After all, the teacher had to do all the hard work to get where she is, so if the student only arrives at the same place they're not working as hard. We should surpass our teachers, in other words. (Look out Wu De!)

The ideal method of undertaking this experiment would be to have two identical Zisha gongfu pots. Use a lightly brewed tea (fewer leaves/shorter steepings), with the same amount in each pot, and brew them side by side. Completely fill one and the other only 80% of the way. Steep them for the same amount of time and then pour each into its own respective cup. Taste them back and forth, starting with the

liquor from the completely filled pot. Focus on the 10 Qualities of a Fine Tea and also note the temperature difference between them.

However, this obviously requires two identical Zisha pots! For those of you that do not have two, you can still try the experiment using just one pot. Again, remember to brew your tea lightly and then alternate steeping between 80% and completely full. Because you are not comparing the cups side by side, you should definitely take notes. I find it helps to write the 10 Qualities vertically in a spreadsheet. This makes it much easier to remember what you are looking for. This may sound nerdy (and a lot of work) but it really helps! In fact, it helped me so much I've decided to include a blank form of this in the Further Readings of our blog!

As always, please go online to our discussion board on the website or social media and share your findings with the whole community. It would be interesting to hear how it went. You could also let everyone know what type of pot you are using as this makes a difference, too. We always love to hear from you!

