



## SUPERIOR PUERH LIQUOR IS RICH & SUBSTANTIAL

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*There are many reasons puerh tea has been able to achieve today's level of prosperity. Those old tea hands, with their unique skills at tasting and appreciating tea are, however, undeniably the source of puerh's rise to fame. If we wish to see puerh continue to develop, we must elevate the tasting abilities and standing of these numerous tea drinkers. We must also continue to build upon our accumulated tea culture. Understanding what makes a fine puerh tea helps one to appreciate puerh, navigate the complicated puerh market and also make decisions about what puerh to store long term.*

In many tea magazines, we find reviews of aged and new puerh teas. And the tea friends who are up to the task of evaluating teas certainly qualify as old tea hands. If we could analyze and rank their opinions, we could infer some commonly agreed upon standards for judging tea, and perhaps also discover previously unexplored areas of dispute. Establishing such criteria could naturally raise the standards for judging teas.

Among the terms often used to evaluate tea, "rich and substantial tea liquor" would seem to be among the essential aspects of superior grade tea, but to what exactly does this refer? Through what kind of concrete standard can we confirm whether a certain tea possesses this "rich and substantial liquor?" This question seems to be somewhat complicated.

First of all, it seems that the language used by our fellow tea tasters is quite varied. For example, all of the following descriptions have been used: "its character is thick and heavy," "its character is thick and rich," "the liquor is dense," "the liquid is thick and straightforward," "the base is deep and strong," "the liquor is dense and thick," etc. We could offer two hypotheses concerning these descriptions:

first, that these descriptions are related to the experience of the person doing the tasting; and second, that these different descriptions have similar meanings, or at least describe relative degrees of a similar experience.

All of these descriptions are of the form "noun + adjective." Consider the precision and richness of these descriptions. If they refer to the "tea's character" or "tea's base," they are excessively general and don't necessarily refer to judgment that took place during tasting. Using words like "quality" or "liquid" is too vague and does not specifically refer to tea. Because of this, we choose to refer to the "tea liquor," since this is a term which should be relatively clear and appropriate.

As for the adjectives that follow, "dense," "dense and thick" and "thick and heavy" are relatively similar in meaning to the idea of being rich in substance. "Deep and ample," "thick and straightforward," "thick and rich" and "thick and substantial" not only refer to a rich degree of substance, they also imply a great variety of contained substances. We choose to use the description "rich and substantial" to express these meanings. We hope that this discussion and our terms resonates with other tea lovers.

### *Thickness & Mouthfeel*

Looking at the words "rich and substantial," we would expect them to be the opposite of "thin and empty." In this light, what kind of tea liquor can be considered "rich and substantial?" From a scientific and logical perspective, it seems that we should first establish an objective procedure for judging tea. Everyone will perhaps approach this procedure differently, but when judging teas from the same group there must be some uniform, standardized and objective evaluation. Only in this way does saying that a tea's liquor is rich and substantial have meaning.

Following this line of scientific thinking, we say that "tea liquor" refers to the result of infusing tea leaves in high-temperature water and those chemical compounds that have dissolved into the water. Then, saying that the "tea liquor is rich and substantial" ought to refer to tea whose portion of these chemical compounds is objectively judged to be higher than other kinds of tea when an equal amount is steeped for the same duration of time. The questions that follow from this ought to be handed off to experts involved in food science research. Exactly which substances are contained



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in tea requires scientific analysis, using instruments to extract, analyze and examine.

In reality, however, tea tasting experts rarely have backgrounds in the field of food science research. Their most common methodology is still based on drinking the tea. When a type of tea is said to have “rich and substantial liquor,” the meaning is likely a kind of feeling in the mouth and not a chemical composition. In other words, it is an experience that a person takes from the tea. It is not based on data analyzed from scientific instruments. It is artistic or aesthetic, rather than scientific or logical. Because of this, we are drawn into the realm of tea as art.

## **Substantial Tea Liquor**

According to individual subjective sensory experiences, rich and substantial tea liquor should likely be further divided into saying “the tea liquor is rich” and “the tea’s nature is substantial.” Saying a tea possesses a rich liquor indicates that it provides a full and satisfying feeling as it enters the mouth. The opposite of this is thin tea liquor, which is hard and sharp. A tea with substantial character is one whose

content is abundant, meaning it possesses ample fragrance, stands up to multiple infusions and possesses various charms. The opposite of this is a tea whose character is empty, meaning its flavor is weak, it does not stand up well to multiple infusions and its appeal is one-dimensional.

Substantial character is a necessary condition for quality tea, but tea with substantial character is not necessarily quality tea. Quality tea must also avoid problems during the production process, must be properly stored as it is aged and must be brewed with water and utensils at appropriate temperature. Furthermore, it should be consumed when the external environment and the spirit are in balance.

Rich and substantial tea liquor implies a number of things. The specific sensory experience includes: fragrance, bitterness, astringency, flavor, the overall harmony of the tea liquor (called “yun (韻)” in Chinese, which literally means the tea “rhymes”), Qi, etc. Each of these details should be analyzed in detail, if we are to provide a thorough discussion of the tea’s numerous characteristics. However, we have decided to begin with perhaps the most important factor of richness in tea liquor: thick content.

## **Rich Tea Liquor**

We believe that thickness of tea liquor is caused by more than one factor. However, if a certain tea contains high amounts of thick substance, it will most likely provide a sense of thickness.

This thick content visually resembles a sticky, frozen, congealed substance. This substance perhaps best resembles a soup that has been thickened with corn starch or wheat flour; or the surface of a cooled soup made from large bones boiled over a long period; or smooth and cooling midsummer products, such as vegetarian gelatin, agar or jelly.

All tea leaves possess a thick component. According to Taiwanese tea farmers, Taiwan’s high altitude teas possess relatively ample thick content. The reason for this is that higher altitude teas grow slowly, so they are able to accumulate high levels of thick substances. Sampling tea, in practice, indicates that spring tea buds possess high levels of thick substance. This is likely stored up by the tea trees over the winter, concentrating higher nutrient levels in the spring buds. It is perhaps also related to relatively high concentration in these teas, compared to volume.

Yet another observation technique is to place an appropriate amount of tea leaves into a porcelain *gaiwan*. If a tea possesses sufficiently high thick content, from the first infusion onward the leaves will appear to stick together and will unfold at an even and slow pace. If observed, this indicates relatively high thick content and most likely a quality tea. From a reverse perspective, what happens when we knead withered tea leaves? If the thick content is sufficiently high, the leaves will easily roll into long and slender stripes, and the hands rubbing the tea will also feel quite sticky.

Some people believe that this thick content refers to the transparent layer floating on the surface of the brewed tea. If this thick material is a transparent layer, though, then the tea and the thick layer should be clearly separated like oil and water. Pouring the tea into a transparent glass container, however, we found that the color and luster of the tea was uniform throughout. In other words, the thick substance must have dissolved into the water. Looking at the levels in tea liquor and the so-called “thick, transparent top layer,” we can still say that high-grade puerh produces a clear and transparent brew, with plentiful layers and a good level of transparency.

## Qualities of Thickness

That sticky, as if frozen, congealed substance can be more concretely observed through the appearance of saponin in the tea liquor. This so-called “saponin” refers to the tiny, pure, white frothy substance that is created as water is poured over the tea leaves. Some tea drinkers believe the saponin released along with the first infusion is very desirable and drink this first infusion of the tea. Other tea drinkers are more concerned with hygiene and use the first infusion to wash the tea leaves. As a result, they place relatively less emphasis on the appearance of saponin.

To more easily observe the saponin, we lift the teapot when pouring into a teacup. The lengthened column of water stirs up a greater amount of saponin. When the pour is completed, its distribution over the surface of the tea can be observed in real time. Based on

multiple observations, we have reached the following conclusion: if the glutinous content is relatively weak, this saponin froth will be relatively coarse and easy to disperse. It will also easily slide to the sides of the cup. If the glutinous content is relatively high, the created saponin broth will be relatively fine and may stay fixed to the surface of the tea in the center of the cup.

If a tea’s liquor has high thick content, shaking the tea cup will only slightly change the position of these bubbles in the brewed tea. The entire cup of tea has a thickness similar to a thickened soup and still feels this way after numerous infusions. If we use light to analyze the surface of the tea liquor, we notice that the surface of the tea rises and falls in irregular form. This is due to capillary action of the saponin foam and fine hair on the surface of the tea leaves.

If we calmly let a cup of highly thick tea cool, we will discover that even after one or two hours the saponin froth maintains its original appearance. It will not significantly dissipate or change position.

Some tea drinkers are accustomed to using the first infusion to wash the tea leaves. If one follows this method, we suggest allowing the water to slightly overflow from the top of the teapot. The tea, carrying a large amount of saponin froth, will flow over the edges of the teapot and into the tea tray. If the tea possesses high levels of thick content, the saponin foam will also appear to stagnate on the surface of the tea tray.

## Experience of Thickness

Observing the tea’s saponin, as well as the appearance of these linked pearls, can give us a handle on a tea’s amount of glutinous substances. These are visual perceptions of beauty. In terms of drinking tea, the sensory experience of tasting tea remains the most important factor.

Tea drinking relies on more than simply *cou gan* (口感, flavor or feeling in the mouth), as this is restricted to the mouth and ignores the sensory experience of the throat, upper jaw and nasal cavity. It is also naturally unable to express the reaction of other parts of the body, such as the esophagus and

the stomach. A complete tea tasting experience is a journey of the whole body and mind. Only this level of experience is able to truly move a person.

To this day, we have maintained the belief that tea that feels smooth in the throat ought to be rich in thick substance. A tea that is rich in thick substance will, likewise, reduce the feeling of astringency on the surface and base of the tongue. At the very least, it provides a buffer of time and space, allowing the tannins in the tea to transform.

Some people say “if it isn’t bitter and it isn’t astringent, it isn’t tea.” Others amend this to say that good tea’s “bitterness has *bui gan* (回甘), and its astringency dissolves into the mouth.” Others further amend this to say “waiting for the bitterness and astringency to be transformed is not as desirable as modifying tea production and brewing techniques, and thus reducing the unpleasant sensation caused by the bitterness and astringency of the tea.” None of these viewpoints are incorrect, and we can see that the wording is being revised and made more accurate. We can also see the manifestation of the continuous refinement of the art and culture of tea.

Holding a mouthful of tea, let it gently rest on the surface of the tongue and then slightly lift the tip of the tongue, allowing the tea to follow the surface of the tongue into the throat. If it is rich in thick substance, the tea feels like a continuous column sticking to the base of the tongue and sliding down the esophagus and into the stomach. It leaves a sticky and thick feeling in the mouth and throat, which is not related to salivation. It is simply the thick quality of the tea adhering to the mouth and esophagus, and leaving them feeling warm and moist. Perhaps this is so-called *run hou* (润喉, moistening of the throat).

As the tea moistens the throat, the thick substances are able to interact with a greater portion of the body’s sensory organs. Other substances found in abundance in the tea also have a greater chance to undergo a follow-up transformation. For example: *bui gan*, dissolving of the astringency, fragrance lingering on the lips, returning fragrance in the throat, etc.

Good tea should be richly thick. This quality is maintained as a tea ages. There are admittedly many factors that

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allow for top-grade, old puerh to reach the sublime level in which it melts in the mouth and feels as if a spring is bubbling up from beneath the tongue. This thick quality, however, is likely a key element.

Experience indicates that thickness diminishes in tea leaves that have been moistly piled together. The result is that the brewed tea is likely to harden, weaken and change the quality of the water. This diminishes the grade of the tea. Inappropriate temperature or moisture during the course of a tea's storage may also lead to a corresponding phenomenon.

## *Fine Tea*

If the quantity of thick substance in a particular tea is high, then the probability that it is rich in other compo-

nents is increased. However, if the tea is only high in thick content and weak in other areas, the brewed tea may provide a satisfying sensation but have very one-dimensional change.

Rich and substantial tea liquor is essential for top-quality tea. This is especially the case when tasting tea outdoors, since the open environment and air flow can easily carry away the fragrance of insufficiently substantial teas. If the tea has a richness that penetrates to the bone, then, as it glides into the mouth and throat, one can calmly feel it spread throughout the body. That kind of mental serenity concentrates one's vitality, and leaves the body and mind comfortable and carefree. It is a moving experience that allows people to forget their concerns and savor the long-lasting aftertaste.

Naturally, dry-aged, high-grade, sun-roasted old puerh has rich and

substantial liquor when brewed. Early puerh materials were mainly from large trees that benefited from the protection of a pristine natural environment and very little human interference or destruction. This has caused these trees to retain a rich composition of materials. These components are stable and concentrated deep in the tea leaves, naturally aiding their gradual transformation over time. Top-grade old tea has undergone the pure refinement of life and has cast away the undesirable, leaving its indomitable essence. It is like when Sakyamuni Buddha came out of the mountains and explained the Buddhist teaching that aimed directly at the core of life. Drinking top-quality old puerh can drive people to tears.

