TEA OF THE MONTH

Over the course of this month, we are rising to the heights of all red tea production. Over the years, we have shared a lot of red tea in this community. We have drunk some fine and unique dian hong teas, published a guide to dian hong in February of this year and we have also drunk Sun Moon Lake "Elevation" every year since Global Tea Hut began, but these are simple, earthy red teas. These are red teas that are drunk rough and raw, leaves in a bowl or sidehandle. They are malty, musky and full of strength. They are masculine. This month, we're turning to the finer side of red tea: the delicate, "tippy" (lots of buds) red teas are made fine, with skill. They are yin, with a floral sweetness that is light on its feet and gentler on the system. And such a fine, delicate tea as this month's, calls for some history, as each sip finds us more and more lost in past times—times when names like "Queen of Fragrance" make sense again.

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) saw many developments in tea processing, including oolong tea, flower-scented tea and red tea. Later, in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), many of the teas developed during this age of innovation evolved further. There are many legends about the beginnings of red tea, and several regions lay claim to the first-ever red tea. In reality, red tea was probably made centuries or even millennia ago by aboriginals, though never commercially. As oxidation is a natural process, it is likely that it occurred, perhaps even accidentally, at some point long ago. However, most tea scholars think that red tea originated in Fujian, near where Cliff Tea comes from.

As we read about in our April issue of this year on Ming Dynasty tea, the first Ming emperor Taizu outlawed the production of powdered, cake tea. At that time, Wuyi and the surrounding regions were amongst the greatest, most famous of all tea-producing areas, offering tribute tea since the Song Dynasty (960–1279). The shift in taste, and the new laws affected local tea production, drastically reducing the amount of tea produced since the locals had only made powdered and caked tea for generations. Though many of the big houses, famous for their Dragon & Phoenix cakes, shut down, the monks continued making tea and drinking it in ceremony and meditation, using simple, loose-leaf green tea. After some time, travelers from Anhui taught the monks pan-fired green tea processing techniques that greatly improved the teas they were making. They had some of the best trees and one of the best terroirs for tea, after all. They say that as the monks learned this new technique of pan-firing green tea to arrest oxidation, they slowly learned that the tea responded to semi-oxidation in a magical way and oolong tea was born. This innovation probably was part trial and error, part insight and skill and part connection to the Leaf. As the leaves got redder, it would only have been a matter of time till the oxidation levels were pushed into "red tea."

Red Sun Rising

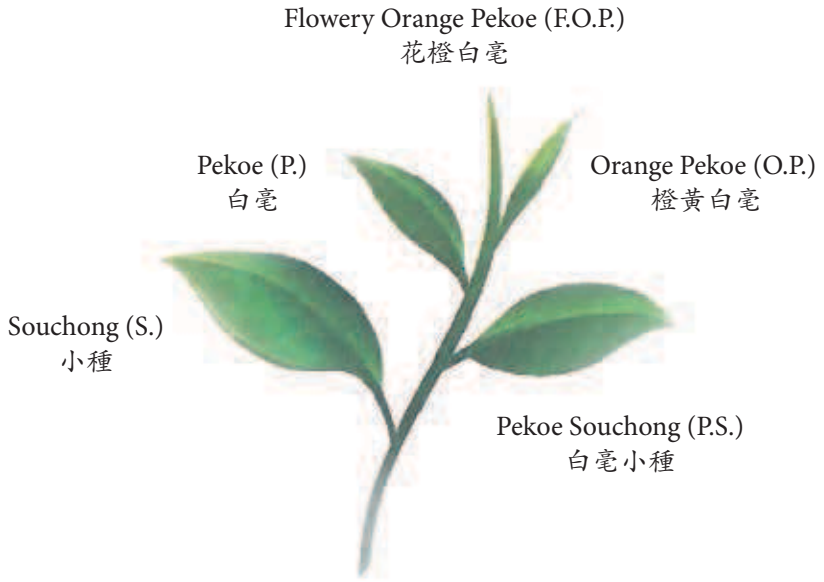
Qimen, Anhui, China

2016 Gongfu Red Tea

Han Chinese

~700 Meters

Traditional Western Leaf Grade Standards for Red Tea



SFTGFOP1 Super Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe (First Grade)
SFTGFOP Super Finest Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe (Standard Grade)
TGFOP Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe
GFOP Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe
FOP Flowery Orange Pekoe
OP Orange Pekoe
P Pekoe
S Souchong

國際紅茶等級
金毫標準

They say that a victorious army was passing through Fujian after quelling a rebellion in Jianxi. They camped in a village near the tea gardens, where they were graciously hosted by the locals, who served a feast to the soldiers. This held up tea production for a day as they camped and the tea was left to wither much longer than the tea farmers were used to. Legend has it, that some of the soldiers slept on the soft piles of withering tea, rolling around in the night and bruising the leaves. They left behind piles of limp, reddened leaves that had been highly oxidized. The farmers decided to dry the tea anyway, rather than wasting Nature's precious bounty. One bright farmer suggested they try smoking the tea dry over a pinewood fire to accelerate the process. And thus, they say, the first red tea was born, called "*Lishan Xiao Zhong* (立山小種)" or "Lapsang Souchong" in the West, which is a corruption of the Fu Zhou pronunciation. They say that this first-ever red tea was a gift from the gods for their hospitality. Less poetic authors claim that this kind of "Bohea" tea ("Bohea" is the local Minnan word for "Wuyi") got its smokiness from innovative tea producers who used pine smoke to speed up production and increase yield for export.

Red tea is really just the "last station on the oolong train," as Wu De often says. Some authors describe red tea as "fully oxidized," but this is not really possible. It is, however, the most oxidized kind of tea. Red tea is really just a furthering of the oxidation process used to make oolong, mostly by increasing the duration of withering and rolling, which is why it was a natural extension that was bound to arise. In the early Ming, almost all teas were all bud, and therefore "unoxidized" green teas (actually, it is not possible to stop all oxidation, so "lightly oxidized" would be more accurate) or semi-oxidized oolongs. At what point the "semi" reaches what we call red tea is hard to tell, as there are lighter red teas and very oxidized oolongs, like Eastern Beauty.

Starting in the early 1800s, the export markets in Europe, the American colonies and the Middle East couldn't get enough red tea. Some attribute the international popularity of red tea in particular to red tea's shelf stability.

茶 Traditionally, "tippy" meant that the tea had more buds. The Orange Pekoe leaf grading system is purported to have Chinese origins, but it is little used outside the West. The origin of the word "pekoe" is also uncertain. Some say it is a corruption derived from the Xiamen Amoy dialect word "pen ho (白毫)" which means "white down," referencing the white fur which is found on the buds of tea varietals in Fujian, especially Fu Ding. Sir Thomas Lipton is credited with popularizing (maybe even inventing) this system of classifying red tea. The "orange," which symbolizes a higher grade of leaf, is probably a reference to the coppery color of a fine, tippy red tea. Other scholars suggest it may have to do with the royal color of the Dutch. There are actually other sub-grades we haven't shown here, including "Broken Orange Pekoe" for bits and even "F" for fannings. Typically, an Orange Pekoe red tea was above average grade, though there never was a true standardization of these terms. The whole grading system was based on the amount of buds and the brokenness of the leaves. Higher grades are therefore made from young, terminal buds with one, two or three of the youngest leaves, all of which are completely intact. Larger leaves or broken bits will result in a lower grade and price.

Above are the leaf sets used to make our Tea of the Month. In this classification system, they would be FOP. Our Tea of the Month is made from a special varietal called "chu ye (櫧葉種)," which is long and spear-like, with a robust but fine tea liquor that is very unique in flavor, aroma and Qi. You could say that they are on the large side of small-leaf, or the smaller side of medium-leaf. There is further sorting, or "refinement," in the processing of the tea, but we chose a tea with some "Pekoe" and "Pekoe Souchong" leaves to give our Tea of the Month a boldness we appreciate in red tea. Bud sets are indeed sweeter, but sometimes lack the depth of a red tea that includes some leaves as well, especially with dian hong or other unique varietals like chu ye. (If you are interested in trying other grades of gongfu red tea, you can get this month's expansion pack, which includes a gongfu red tea from Wuyi Mountain and one from Yixing.)

Others suggest that the popularity of red tea has more to do with the compatibility of the bold flavor profiles of red teas with the cuisines of Germany, England, France and other nations where red tea has become the default tea type (mistakenly called "black tea").

It was this popularity that led to large-scale production of red tea in China, and to the eventual theft of tea seeds, tea plants and tea production techniques, which were taken by Scottish and English adventurer-entrepreneurs and transplanted to India and other colonial territories (such as modern-day Sri Lanka and Kenya). These entrepreneurs took their limited knowledge of tea production and used it to fashion machines to replace the handmade aspects of tea processing. The availability of cheap red tea fueled its popularity as a tea type further, making it the most popular category of tea in the West to this day.

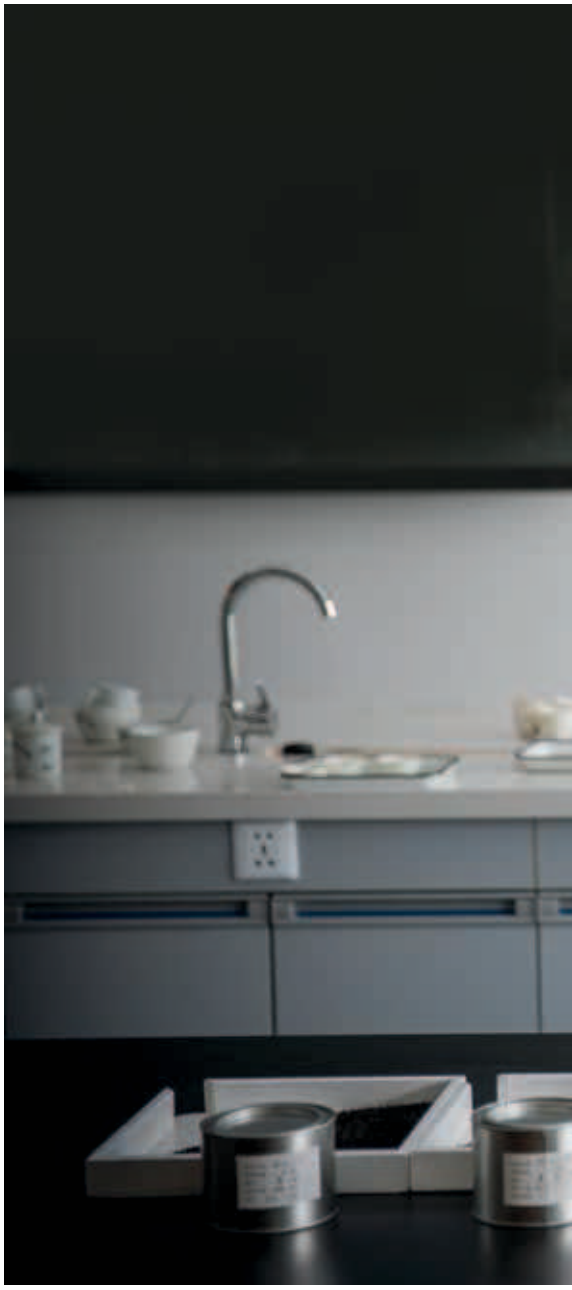
Today, red tea is produced using this machine-driven approach in many countries, including Brazil, India, Indonesia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. More recently, machine-made red teas have appeared in Japan (where they are called "*Wakocha*" or "Japanese red tea"), and machine-made red tea has even made its way back to China. (We visited a large industrial factory on our trip.)

In recent years, the interest in handmade and more traditionally made red tea has seen a resurgence in China, Taiwan and elsewhere, resulting in a wider availability of handmade red teas from China and Taiwan (including our Tea of the Month). For this and other reasons, the characteristics that red tea drinkers in China and Taiwan prefer tend to be different from the typical tea drinker in the West. Instead of looking for a dark color in the infusion, or boiled liquor, and a bold flavor that can handle milk and sugar, these tea lovers seek out beautifully shaped leaves and infusions that are best savored without any additives. Also, while most red tea drinkers steep their leaves only once, those opting for more traditionally made red teas prefer to let the leaves open up gradually with many short infusions, savoring the tea's patience and inner spirit, rather than gulping from a to-go cup while eating a pastry on the way to the office.

As we've explained in previous issues, different tea types are processed differently. While processing is not the sole differentiating factor (indeed, varietals, terroir, harvest seasons and many other factors can make substantial differences!), processing often makes the most profound difference in how a given leaf's liquor will look, taste and feel by the time it reaches your teapot or bowl. The genres of tea are not "all in the processing." The reality is far more complicated than that: each genre of tea is as much a terroir and the local varietals of tea, as it is the processing methods used there. In fact, some authors include culture and processing methods in the very term "terroir," which is an insight that we appreciate since it acknowledges and celebrates the very natural part that humans play in Nature and in Tea. If the tradition of tea processing is indeed evolving and improving based on the idea that "better" processing is tea-making that brings out the natural highlights of the trees and leaves, then you could say that farmers who do so are as naturally a part of the life cycle of that tea as the sun or rain. There are also deeper and subtler implications of including processing methods in the word "terroir," beyond just climate, weather and soil, since doing so testifies to the fact that humanity *is* Nature. These days, we feel disconnected from the world,

杯中真理

浸泡一個故事



茶 Our hosts at the Sun River Tea Factory (祥源茶) showed us all their grades of Qimen red tea, including one made from a Maofeng varietal. They taught us that there are three criteria for a fine Qimen red tea: first, there should be golden tips, signifying a high amount of buds in the tea; second, the leaves should be black and shiny, not gray and lackluster; and, finally, a fine Qimen red tea should have thin, needle-like leaves that resemble spears. We tasted all the grades to see if we could discern the differences in the cup.

even though we are as ingrained as any species of *Thea*, and our influence can be just as natural and harmonious, or as destructive, as any other force of Nature. So, it is worth repeating that the differences are *not* all in the processing. The next time someone tells you white tea, oolong or puerh is a processing method, you should raise a finger in "wait a minute" doubt.

Oftentimes, Western authors mislead us by saying that all tea is the same plant and only differs in processing. Actually, of the seven genres of tea, this is really only true of red tea, which happens to be the most consumed tea in the West, which helps explain some of the confusion. The other six genres of tea are as much a varietal as they are a processing methodology. But you can process *any* tea as a red tea, and usually with nice results. Of all the seven genres of tea (white, green, yellow, red, black, oolong and puerh), red tea is the only one that is truly "all in the processing." In other words, you can take tea from any varietal and terroir and process it like a red tea. And it is often nice. We've had great Taiwanese high-mountain oolong (*Ching shin,* 清心, varietal) processed like red tea, the "gongfu reds," like our Tea of the Month, are essentially all-bud green teas processed like red and puerh raw material processed like red tea, called "dian hong."

Knowing that any varietal can become red tea is also valuable when it comes to understanding just how the misinformation that differences in tea are all in the processing became so widespread in the Western world. Red tea, as we mentioned earlier, is the most consumed and produced tea in the West. Almost everyone in the Western world who drinks tea, drinks red tea. And since it is true that "the difference is all in the processing" for red tea, you could see how this would be mistakenly applied to other kinds of tea, assuming that this principle is as true for green or oolong tea as it is for red (which it clearly is not). Only red tea is truly just a processing method.

One of the characteristics used to evaluate red tea is its clarity: finer red tea does not have any cloudiness in the liquor, so it is important that we have taken a few bowls' worth of time to clear up all this misunderstanding. As we travel further into our session, we'll have to do so with the understanding that red tea is unique amongst all kinds of tea since it has no terroir or varietal(s) to call home. This means that a discussion of any given red tea will have to include the varietal that is used to make it. This month, our discussion is about gongfu red tea, which is usually made of green tea varietals.

Gongfu Red Tea

Traditionally, gongfu red tea was called "congou" in the West, which was an attempt to transcribe the Hokkien pronunciation of "gongfu (工夫)," which is "*kang hu*." The most expensive and well-known version of this red tea back in the day was called "Panyang Congou," which was also a corruption of the Chinese "*tanyang* (坦洋)." *Tanyang* is a varietal of tea from Fujian. Gongfu red tea is not named after the brewing method, though both refer to the same term, which means "mastery through self-discipline." The reason such red tea is called "gongfu red tea" is because it is produced from high-grade tea, and with much more attention to production and skill. Traditionally, most places where gongfu red tea is made would reserve the buds for green tea and the lower grades (second flushes, larger leaves, etc.) for red tea. Gongfu red tea, on the other hand, is made completely of first flush bud and leaf sets, and therefore represents the highest grade, most valuable tea the farm produces. Ordinarily, red tea production is simple, but such valuable tea requires attention and focus, since it will have to be sold at a premium price. Though such tea is not named after the brewing method, we certainly try our best to prepare it that way since it is so valuable. Just as the farmers worked hard to make such fine tea, we should brew it to its highest potential.

Red tea has been produced in Qimen, Anhui since 1875. They say a scholar named Yu Ganchen (余干臣) learned red tea production from Fujian and brought it to Anhui, which was at that time making Maofeng green tea. The tea's very unique fragrance of orchids, slightly smoky and sweet, won the hearts of tea lovers throughout China and eventually throughout the West, where it was (once again) mispronounced and called "Keemun."

Many varietals are used to make red tea in the Qimen area, including Maofeng green tea (祁門毛峰). Another is called "*chu ye* (槠葉種)." These larger yet tender leaves result in a robust but fine tea that is very unique in flavor, aroma and Qi. You could say that they are on the large side of small-leaf or the smaller side of medium-leaf. *Chu ye* is a very unique varietal, with long, thin, spear-like leaves that roll up very thin. The leaves are robust and full-bodied, which is good for a red tea, but also delicate and fine, resulting in a bold yet sweet liquor that is unique amongst red teas.

Red tea processing generally follows the same simple steps: The tea is picked, then goes through a heavy withering. This step involves piling the tea in woven trays or in large troughs, with fans to circulate air and remove moisture as it evaporates. The withering process reduces moisture content and initiates oxidation. With most red tea, this withering is very long, often twelve hours or more. Then the tea goes through rolling by machine or by hand for up to ninety minutes. (In the case of CTC, "Cut, Tear, Curl" tea, rolling is combined with additional steps in which the leaves are chopped up, causing them to quickly oxidize, and then rolled into pellets as the tea is further oxidized and dried.) This breaks down the cell walls and releases their essential oils, allowing the air to interact with otherwise trapped chemical components, furthering oxidation. Some kinds of red tea are then piled and oxidized a second time, which entails additional exposure of the leaves' essential oils to oxygen. It involves letting the tea sit for up to a few hours, before the oxidation is halted with heat. This additional oxidation results in further changes in the tea's flavor, aroma, color and Qi when drunk. Finally, the tea is dried, usually by baking it for short durations to halt oxidation and dry the tea for storage. Sorting out broken bits (often with a winnower) and packaging follow the drying.

Qimen gongfu red tea follows these same basic steps with some more care. What really makes a red tea "gongfu" is the care and skill used in the processing, though the steps are much the same. Traditionally, leaves are picked in the spring, though many farms nowadays also do a summer harvest. Only the bud and three leaves are chosen, as with many kinds of tea. One of the differences between gongfu red tea and other kinds of red tea is in the sorting, called "refinement." Qimen red tea, and other gongfu red teas, are separated into many grades, sometimes before and after processing. In the past, only the best leaves were picked and then sorted during withering. This refined picking and more skilled processing, with an attention to detail is what makes this tea "gongfu." Firm and tender leaves with a dark luster, subtle fragrance of honey or orchids, as well as a bright red liquor that is deep and sweet, are the result of finely crafted gongfu red tea, like our Tea of the Month. "*Xin Ya* (新芽)" and "*Hao Ya* (毫芽)" are some of the many higher grades of Qimen red tea.

茶 ***A retired, sixty-year-old tea master, Min Xuan Wen (閔宣文), kindly demonstrated hand rolling for us. The rolling is done in a heated wok, to keep the tea leaves warm as they are rolled, further oxidizing them and breaking down the cells to make a richer, redder liquor.***


手工
讓一切不同

Red Sun Rising

Red Sun Rising is an amazing example of beautiful Qimen red tea. As we have often discussed, each step in tea is more important than the next, as it will determine all that follows. The varietal will determine the harvest time, which will determine how it is withered and so on. This means that the first and most important factor in a tea's quality is the terroir. The climate, rainfall, sun, soil and ecology will all cooperate to make the leaves, so a fine terroir is the most important foundation for a fine tea like this. And this is where our Tea of the Month shines brightly, for the farm this tea came from is an "ecological farm (生態)," which goes beyond just organic. It is a "rainforest protected" area, due to the number of species that are protected over the vast area this farm represents, including many rare birds, lizards, frogs and insects. All of this biodiversity plays a huge role in the health of the land, the trees, and, of course, the leaves used to make this precious tea. It was amazing to walk amongst the healthy hills, breathing fresh air, and to find such healthy and happy tea trees thriving in such glorious surroundings. Bending over, you could see that there was a teeming world beneath each tree, covered in moss and mold, insects and plants, all of which create the necessary biodiversity needed to make vibrant tea. We hope your cup fills you with such visions, each sip a breath of such clean mountain air.

We were also very impressed by the farmer's dedication to organic farming. He told us that they had formed a local cooperative much like the one that Mr. Xie has formed, training farmers to use organic methods and then helping to sell some of their tea cooperatively after they have received certification. Our guide proudly pronounced that more than three hundred farmers have joined the cooperative so far!

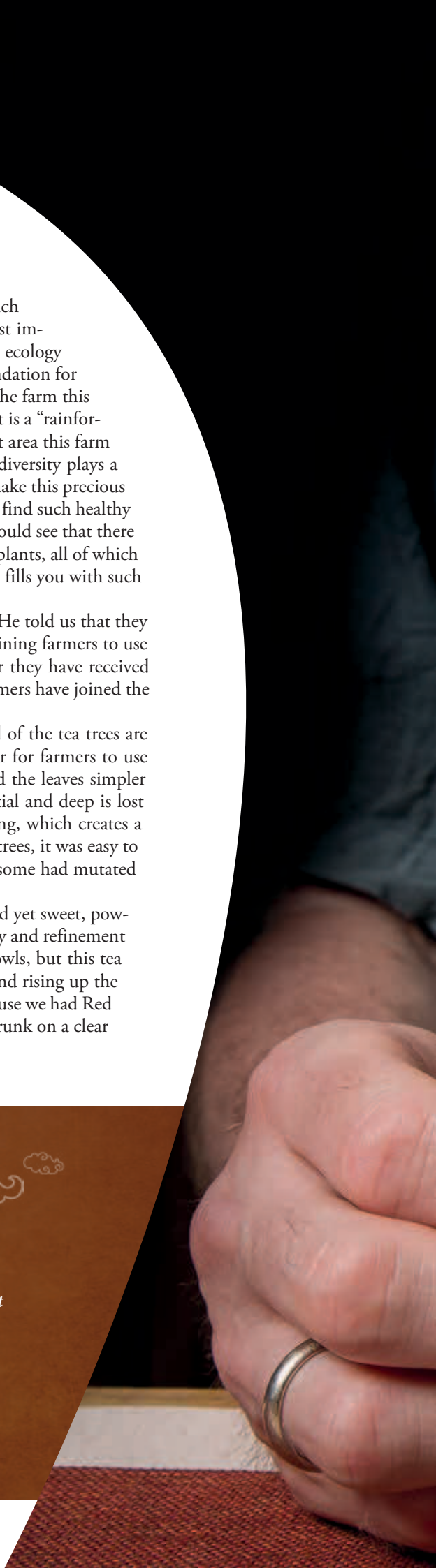
Another unique thing about the farm where this tea was sourced is that all of the tea trees are seed-propagated, which is incredibly rare in this day and age. It is much easier for farmers to use cuttings, allowing for a uniformity that makes the farm easier to maintain and the leaves simpler to process. But as we have discussed in many issues, something natural, essential and deep is lost when the trees are not allowed to reproduce in a natural way—cross-pollinating, which creates a more vibrant, natural expression of the tea's energy. As we walked amongst the trees, it was easy to see the result of this seed-propagation, since each and every tree was different: some had mutated to have reddish leaves, and they all were unique in size and shape as well.

The liquor of Red Sun Rising brews deep and red like its namesake. It is bold yet sweet, powerful like a dian hong, with much less strength and power, and an added delicacy and refinement that bring grace to the table. Most red teas are best enjoyed in large cups or bowls, but this tea is to be sipped, much like an oolong. The Qi is like a morning breeze—fresh and rising up the way a fine oolong does. Perhaps you taste Golden Thread in this tea. That's because we had Red Sun Rising shipped to Taiwan in bamboo baskets like Liu An. This tea is best drunk on a clear and clean morning, with birdsong and a clear sky.

Sidehandle *Gongfu*

Water: *spring water, gathered or bottled*
Fire: *coals, infrared or gas*
Heat: *hotter, fish-eye, roughly 90-95 ° C*
Brewing Methods: *gongfu or sidehandle (gongfu is better)*
Steeping: *longer, to taste*
**long, one flash, then progressive, if gongfu*
Patience: *ten to twenty steepings*

茶 ***Use a taller zisha pot if possible, with thick walls. This improves the long steepings of red tea.***



Brewing Tips

Most red tea is simple—easy to make and easy to brew. But our Tea of the Month is a gongfu red tea. When teas are made with such heart and skill, they demand a brewing method that honors the work that went into them. After all, a tea that was made with tremendous effort and skill would be disrespected by casual brewing that failed to highlight its quality. For that reason, we have suggested that you brew this tea gongfu. If you don't have gongfu teaware, you can also brew this tea in a side-handle pot, of course, which also results in some beautiful bowls that emphasize the tea's vibrancy and boldness, though some of its delicacy and grace will be lost.

Oftentimes, we are taught to enjoy the stronger, early steepings, and then to be disappointed as the high notes and most noble flavors and aromas start to dissipate, feeling like the tea is losing its essence. For this month, we would invite you to start to correct this way of thinking in all your tea brewing.

Instead of feeling like a tea is losing its quality in later steepings as it gets lighter, learn to enjoy each cup as it is, without comparing it to the boldness of the early steepings. There are actually other subtle beauties and wonders that underlie the stronger flavors and aromas, which are much more pronounced when the stronger flavors and aromas have dissipated. These secondary and tertiary nuances are available to the sensitive drinker in early steepings as well, but often become much more enjoyable in later steepings. Only enjoying the early, stronger steepings, and then watching the later brews in terms of a loss, is much akin to the potentially destructive habit—promoted by the mainstream media—of only recognizing beauty in youth. Of course, there is a beauty worth admiring in young people, both in their physical appearance and their youthful vigor, but it is not necessary to view the aging process as a loss of this. Then we fight against the very natural process of growing old, instead of celebrating all the beauty and wonder in our later years.

Oftentimes, the later steepings of any tea take us closer to the environment the tea was grown in, with mineral flavors of the earth in which it was grown. One of the best brewing tips we could ever offer is to learn to enjoy these later steepings in their own right, and see the movement from strong, bold liquor to sweet, minerally water as a graceful and wonderful transformation, thereby finding so much more enjoyment in your tea!