

TEA OF THE MONTH

 ver the course of this month, we will be exploring meditation and its relationship to tea. We needed a powerful tea that calms and centers us, shining light on the connection between Zen and Tea, and why the sages of the past have said they are “one flavor.” A lot of the most powerful teas are rare and aged, and therefore beyond the budget of Global Tea Hut, except in an Expansion Pack. The tea we call “Samadhi” was perfect in every way, aged, beautiful and rich in meditative energy. “Samadhi” means “one-pointed mind” or “concentration,” which is a testament to its meditative energy—perfect for this month’s exploration! And since Samadhi is a 1990s loose-leaf shou puerh, this is the perfect opportunity to review some of what makes shou puerh what it is and discuss loose-leaf aged puerh in general, which is a topic we have been excited to explore with you for some time.

Let’s review the basics of puerh. To begin with, we have to start by dividing puerh into “sheng (生)” and “shou (熟).” “Sheng” means “raw” puerh; it’s the greener, more astringent kind of puerh, which can be enjoyed when it is young and fresh or aged to ferment naturally over time. On the other hand, shou, which means “ripe,” is artificially fermented by humans, so it is darker to begin with. The words “sheng” and “shou” are used in Chinese to discuss food as well, referring to “raw/uncooked” versus “cooked”

meals. The terms also describe the ripening of fruit. Understanding this distinction is important for exploring puerh, and more specifically shou puerh, more deeply.

In order to better understand tea processing, we also have to return to a review of oxidation and fermentation. Oxidation is an enzymatic process: basically, cellular break down due, of course, to exposure to oxygen, like when a banana or apple turns brown on the counter. Fermentation is similar, but is metabolic and involves the presence of bacteria and other microorganisms, like the changes in yogurt, cheese or alcohol. Sugar is converted into acids, gases, and alcohol. This distinction is important in understanding tea, and especially shou puerh, because many kinds of tea are withered (oxidized) to change the chemistry of the tea and remove moisture from the brittle leaves before processing. But puerh is also fermented post-production, which means it has a strong relationship to microorganisms—whether it is naturally fermented (aging) or artificially fermented in the factory, as with shou. Over time, puerh both oxidizes and ferments. These natural changes are more pronounced in sheng than shou. But we’ll get to the aging of shou in a bit.

Like many genres of tea, puerh starts with “*maocha* (毛茶),” which means, “rough” or “unfinished” tea. You’ll hear this term used most often with regard to the genres of oolong and

puerh, as they traditionally have “finishing” steps that occur later and/or at a different location from where the tea was initially processed. With puerh, the tea is processed fully (dried) and then sent to a factory to be blended, compressed or made into shou. And even back in the day when the final steps were done at farm, they were still done at a later date (sometimes months later) so the term “*maocha*” was still relevant. In oolong, it is the roasting, which is done later, or traditionally at the shop rather than the farm. The reason the finishing steps in these teas are completed later is that the farmers have to focus on finishing the harvested tea on the day it is plucked or the quality will suffer. And since there is freshly-picked tea coming in every morning during the harvest season, they have little time to sleep, let alone finish the tea, which can be done later. These days, with regard to puerh, almost all *maocha* is sent to be finished at factories who want control over the finishing steps like blending, choosing sheng or shou and also deciding what size or shape to compress the tea into. But before we get to the factory, let’s understand what *maocha* is.

Puerh *maocha* is harvested; withered, out and indoors, depending on the place/tradition and the weather; fired (*sha qin*, 殺青) to arrest the oxidation of the withering and de-enzyme the tea; rolled (*rou nian*, 揉捻) to shape the tea and further break down the cells; and then sun-dried.



Samadhi (安止定)



Yunnan, China



Late 1990s Shou Puerh



Yunnanese



~500-1000 Meters





茶 Shou is compressed right after piling. If the leaves dry, a much deeper steam would be needed to re-moisten the leaves, which are stiff from the piling. This would change the flavor of the tea, so shou is almost always compressed while still moist from the piling. Then, the cakes are dried on racks or pallets before the final wrapping and packaging in a tong (筒, seven cakes).



The two defining steps that make puerh unique are the firing and drying. The de-enzyming of tea is done to stop the withering and also to remove green enzymes that make the tea bitter and astringent. Like most teas, puerh is fired in a wok (often wood-fired), but it is done at a lower temperature and for a shorter duration than most kinds of tea. This, along with the varietal of puerh, is why young sheng is so bitter and astringent. Puerh is fired in this way to allow the heat-resistant spores to survive the processing, since they will be paramount in the post-production fermentation process. The sun-drying is what also separates puerh from most kinds of tea, and it is done for the same reason as the firing, since sunlight and heat are just what the spores need to start colonizing the tea again.

After the maocha is dried, it leaves the farm for the factory. However, it is ideal to finish the tea at source, since the water and micro-ecology will be unique for each place, but that rare-

ly happens nowadays. The tea is then blended or left single-region and compressed into various shapes of cakes as sheng puerh, which can then be enjoyed young or aged for later. The tea is steamed, compressed and dried on racks (often with fans, but traditionally in the sun) before being wrapped individually in natural paper and then often in stacks made of bamboo skin called a "tong (筒)." But if the tea is to be shou, it has a whole other journey to travel.

Shou puerh is artificially fermented by piling in a process called "wo dui (渥堆)," which is essentially composting: the tea is piled to about a meter, sprayed with water and usually covered with a thermal blanket. The heat inside is why shou is sometimes called "cooked" puerh. The pile is then stirred regularly until the desired degree of artificial fermentation is reached. To fully ferment the tea takes between forty-five and sixty days, which is how most shou is made these days.

Shou piling actually happens in two phases, wet and dry. The first, wet-piling is primarily a fermentation of bacteria that break down the cells of the puerh. This piling is much deeper, usually a meter. During the second, drier piling, the thermal blanket is removed (if one was used) and the piles are thinned out (usually to around 20cm). This is when the yeasts and molds become more active in the tea. If the tea is destined to be loose-leaf shou, then the tea will be stirred and dried thoroughly. If the shou is to be compressed, the second stage of piling will be cut short while tea is still slightly damp.

Shou tea has to be compressed before it dries—right after the piling. Some factories do compress aged loose-leaf shou later, but doing so always damages the quality of the tea. Once shou tea dries, the leaves are tight and twisted from the heavy fermentation, so getting them to stick in a cake at a later date requires a much heavier, hot-

THE PROCESSING OF SHOU PUERH

熟普洱製作工藝

THE PROCESSING OF MAOCHA

採摘
Plucking

萎凋
Withering

殺青
De-enzyming

揉捻
Rolling

曬干
Sun-drying

THE PROCESSING OF SHOU

分級
Sorting

堆
Piling
Artificial Fermentation

干燥
Drying

蒸氣
Steaming

壓制成餅
Compression

裝袋包裝
Packaging

雲南茶轉型

黧黑剛勁

青翠明亮

ter and deeper steaming than with other puerh, which effects the quality of the tea, lending it boiled-tea flavors. It is, therefore, always better to compress shou right after piling. If one wanted to use aged tea, it would be better to age the maocha as sheng and then pile/compress it later, when it has matured to the desired age.

Loose-leaf Puerh

As the value of aged puerh has grown over the last twenty-five years, it has become increasingly important for experts to develop techniques for verifying vintage. This is mostly achieved through what one could call “wrapperology,” which is the study of the packaging of vintage puerh to determine age and authenticity. This study does include an understanding of the tea leaves—their appearance, aroma and flavor (if one is permitted to taste the tea before purchasing, which makes

things easy for the experienced puerh lover). It also includes the large trademark ticket (*da piao*, 大票), which is often included in a *jian* (件, 84 cakes, or 12 *tongs*); the wrapping of the *tong* (7 cakes), including the bamboo skin and whether string, bamboo or wire is used to tie it; the wrappers on the cakes themselves; and, finally, the inner trademark ticket (*nei fei*, 內飛), which is compressed into the tea cake itself. Using a combination of these factors, an expert can determine the age of a puerh cake quite accurately.

Not only does the tea age in a particular way, but the paper does as well, since cakes were always wrapped in natural-fiber paper (and still are nowadays, for the most part). In fact, you may notice bug bites in an old puerh wrapper, which is because of the fibers. There are actually more bugs interested in the paper used to wrap old puerh cakes than the tea, especially in Southeast Asia, which means you'd be hard pressed to find an old cake without

some munch-marks on the wrapper. A good example of the paper/ink aging in a significant way is the famous “Yellow Mark” cakes of the 1970s. The tea character in the center of the wrapper (*cha*, 茶), surrounded by the 8 “middle” characters (*zhong*, 中), which represent China and the directions, characterized the tea cakes from the Masterpiece (1949–1972) and Chi Tze (1972–1998) eras of puerh. Many (not all) of the Yellow Mark cakes have a yellowish tea character on the wrapper. However, when the cakes were new, the 茶 character was actually green. It has only become yellow over time, as the ink has aged and the blue in the green has faded.

Sometimes wrapperologists can even determine the exact year of a cake, even though the exact same wrapper was used for five years, or even a decade. Changes in the wrapper are the obvious way to distinguish different vintages or eras, but sometimes the changes are subtler.

Factories used wooden stamps to print the wrapper back in the day. Eventually, the stamps would wear out and be replaced. Sometimes, a particular character would have a nick in it, as the wooden stamp was dropped or hit against something, creating a small indentation in a particular character. Wrapperologists can track the changes in the stamps as they wear down and are then replaced every few years.

Along with the tea leaves themselves, and an in-depth understanding of what a particular recipe looks like, as well as the changes in puerh over time, resulting in different colors of leaves, liquor, flavor, aroma, etc., one can therefore use the *jian*, *tong*, wrapper, trademark tickets and other features to verify the vintage of puerh to various degrees of accuracy. It is important to understand all of this as context for a discussion of aged loose-leaf puerh because one cannot rely on any of these methods to date aged loose-leaf puerh, which is to say loose-leaf puerh doesn't really have a vintage.

A tea lover has to be careful when shopping for aged loose-leaf puerh, as there is really no way to verify the age with any kind of accuracy. It is therefore better to ignore the date of tea, as it rarely means anything when evaluating an aged loose-leaf puerh for purchase. Obviously, except in the rarest of circumstances when some original packaging remains for a loose-leaf puerh (these are extremely rare and expensive), there is no *jian*, no *tong*, no wrapper and no trademark tickets. There is only the tea and the word of the vendor, and the latter is, of course, useless, as it is often just marketing. Even if the vendor is honest, the age of loose-leaf puerh tends to grow as it passes hands—with each vendor adding some time as they pass it on. An early 2000s loose-leaf tea is sold as “late 90s” to one vendor, who passes it on as “mid 90s” to an honest vendor who now labels it as “mid 90s,” because that is the information they were told when they bought it. Even if you do trust your source, the only

way to really be certain of the age is if the shopkeeper bought the tea new and aged it themselves, so it only ever had one owner (our Tea of the Month is like this). Otherwise, we cannot rely on the label or what the merchant says in person or on their website. And so, without accurate description and absolutely no wrapperology to rely on, we are left only with the tea leaves themselves, but that is tricky as well.

Blending in Loose-Leaf Puerh

Nowadays, there is also a lot of confusion about blended versus single-region tea, as well as what defines “old-growth” puerh. It is good to have some clarity on these issues, at least in terms of what we are writing about in the pages of Global Tea Hut. As for the first issue, there are great blended teas from the Masterpiece (1949–1972), Chi Tze (1972–1998) and Newborn



(1998–present) eras of puerh. Sometimes, teas from different regions, or even the same region, enhance each other beautifully. All teas are technically blends, since different sides of the same tree will produce different leaves, let alone different parts of the same forest. Still, there is something to be said for single-region puerh since that was the way that all puerh tea was traditionally produced. All the teas from the Antique Era (pre-1949) were single region. The terroir of a place, including the culture of how to process the tea is then homogeneous. This includes the genetic heritage of the trees, the climate and soil, the microbial environment so important to the tea's fermentation, and ideally also the spiritual/cultural rituals that surround harvest and production.

Strictly speaking, then, every puerh tea is a blend, but for the purpose of our discussion of aged loose-leaf puerh, we have to distinguish two kinds of blending in puerh. The first is blending during production and the

second is blending over time, which is more detrimental to properly dating aged loose-leaf puerh. Almost all loose-leaf puerh from the '90s or earlier was blended when it was released. For the most part, the best teas were always compressed in cakes and lower grade teas were blended and sold as loose-leaf. Most of the traditional loose-leaf blends were what was called "border tea" back in the day, which meant tea from more southerly regions of Yunnan, or even Laos or Vietnam. These days, such teas can be superior to Yunnanese puerh, especially as agrochemicals have found their way into puerh production, which adversely affects quality if you are someone who cares as much about the environment as we do. We would rather have a clean, simple tea over a tea from a famous region or garden that uses agrochemicals in other words. However, back in the day, this wasn't an issue and so-called "border tea" was considered inferior.

Over the last fifteen to twenty years, it has become more common to sell

single-region loose-leaf puerh, which is technically *maocha*. But the majority of loose-leaf puerh is still blended at the factory. When dealing with aged loose-leaf puerh, we can assume that it was all blended and packaged and that it was almost always inferior to the compressed products the factory was producing. But this kind of production blending isn't the real issue when it comes to understanding the vintage of loose-leaf puerh—that would be blending over time.

Virtually all aged loose-leaf puerh teas are blended over time, which means that the various merchants who have the tea add to it to increase the volume. They also create blends. Most aged, so-called "sheng" loose-leaf puerh teas are a blend of some aged sheng, some young, wet-stored sheng and a bit of shou. You can see this in the spent leaves, which often betray the differences in age of the various teas blended in. Adding tea to increase weight and make more money is only a small part of this kind of blending.



Other times, especially back in the day in Hong Kong, before aged puerh became so valuable, many of these blends were about flavor, and therefore produced to make nice tea. As long as we are aware that this is happening, this need not be regarded as a bad thing. The fact of the matter is that loose-leaf puerh is cheaper than cakes by orders of magnitude—and most often because it doesn't have a verifiable vintage (as we said earlier, factories often reserved their best teas for cakes which also influences loose-leaf quality), so not having a vintage can actually be a benefit, especially as the price of aged puerh soars further into astronomical realms that only the richest people can venture into. This means that aged loose-leaf puerh may be the only kind some of us can afford at all, let alone enjoy on a regular basis, so the issues that surround this genre of puerh are also, from another perspective, its strengths.

Aged & Aging Loose-Leaf Puerh

The best way to really and truly verify vintage in puerh tea is to drink it, especially if one has a lot of experiences drinking aged puerh of various vintages. The truth is always in the cup, no matter what the merchant or even the wrapperologists says. The experienced tea drinker will be able to taste the relative age and the storage conditions of a tea, and thereby know its value. However, this is also tricky with loose-leaf puerh, as it ages differently than compressed puerh.

Setting aside the issue of blending over time, and the effects of adding wet-stored sheng and a bit of shou to aged sheng to increase weight or make it seem older than it is—aside from that, loose-leaf puerh ages faster and worse than compressed tea. We invite all of you to experiment as we have, many times over the years, with aging a maocha alongside the same tea compressed. Not only will the loose-leaf tea age faster, it won't be as good. There is more to compression than just the convenience of transportation, as some authors would have you believe. Compressed

tea does age more smoothly and better. This is probably in part due to the steaming process, which softens the leaves for compression. We have also noticed a difference in traditional stone compression, which is looser, and machine-compressed tea, which is tighter. No doubt the heat, moisture and loose compression creates the ideal environment for the microbes which are active in fermenting the puerh over time. Also, puerh doesn't just ferment over time, it also oxidizes, and the compression probably slows this down, creating the ideal rate over time. Loose-leaf puerh has too much surface area exposed to oxygen and therefore it changes more rapidly and less smoothly. The increased airflow also means more humidity, which is why these teas are ideal candidates for wet-storage. They are also more susceptible to mold. At the end of ten years, a loose-leaf puerh will appear more aged than the cake version, and have a darker liquor, though it will be far less enjoyable than the compressed version of the same tea. (This is assuming that the storage environment was the same, as different storage conditions would add another variable to complicate this scenario.)

Since loose-leaf tea ages faster, especially if you accelerate it with wet-storage, which means keeping the tea in an environment with high humidity, it is no wonder that merchants started adding on some years to their descriptions, since their customers would also have experience drinking compressed puerh. It is also no surprise that these were the teas that were often chosen as candidates for wet-storage, as they can be fermented faster. When you couple this with the fact that almost all vintage loose-leaf teas are blends of aged sheng, wet-stored sheng and a bit of shou, you begin to realize that loose-leaf puerh teas do not have a vintage at all. Except in rare cases, there is no point in dating loose-leaf puerh teas. You can discuss them in that way, but only if you do so with a proverbial grain of salt—without letting the “date” be the criteria for evaluating such teas. But if we cannot rely on the “age” of a loose-leaf puerh, how then do we evaluate them?



History of Shou Puerh

熟普洱歷史

Deciding when to begin the history of shou puerh depends on how we define shou. If shou is any artificially fermented puerh, then it is actually quite old, since aboriginals have been artificially fermenting puerh tea in many different ways for centuries: roasting it, burying it, stuffing it in bamboo, etc. Different tribes had different ways of consuming puerh, but it was rare to drink it young and green, as young sheng puerh is astringent and considered “cold” in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and therefore not so healthy for most Chinese people that have “cold” constitutions. Consequently, most tribes developed their own way of artificially fermenting, roasting or boiling puerh to make it more palatable. For the sake of this discussion, however, we are going to restrict the term “shou” to its modern sense of piled puerh that has gone through *wo dui*.

Piled shou puerh is a modern sub-genre, beginning in the 1960s. In most books and articles you will find either the dates 1972, 1973 or 1974 listed as the beginning of shou puerh. There was some confusion, but recent research into historical records has verified that 1973 is the correct date. 1973 is the date the government licensed the first commercial production of shou puerh tea for sale, starting with the Kunming Factory. However, research and under-the-table batches were being produced as early as 1965 (perhaps even earlier). It took the factories a number of years to demonstrate a consistency, safety and quality that the government would license (all factories were state-run during the Communist Era, of course). We actually have a ‘60s shou brick here at the Center. More of the batches from that time were done for research, though it is likely that the factories tried to mitigate costs by selling some of this tea illegally as well.

Sheng puerh takes seventy years to reach full maturity. That number is not arbitrary. As sheng puerh ages further and further, the aging process itself begins to slow down. The cells crumble onto one another and the fermentation therefore relaxes. Even a beginner can tell the difference between a one and three-year-old puerh, just as the difference between five and ten years is obvious. But the difference between ten, fifteen and twenty years becomes harder to detect, requiring more experience with aged and aging puerh. After that, even the experts have to start gauging the tea in terms of decades. At seventy years the physical appearance of the liquor will not change anymore: black in the center, moving out into browns, then auburn and maroon with a golden ring at the edge. The tea will change beyond that, adding depth in Qi and flavor, but those changes will be for the next generation. Of course, puerh can be enjoyed long before full maturity—even thirty-year-old puerh is marvelous. Nonetheless, it is easy to understand why producers,

distributors and consumers would look for ways to speed up a process that is measured in decades or even generations.

The process of speeding up fermentation began long ago with wet storage. Puerh lovers, especially in Hong Kong, would carefully store their tea for a few years in warehouses near the sea or in basements with very high humidity, rotating it to higher, drier warehouses occasionally. This “traditional storage” would greatly speed up the fermentation process, decreasing the quality of the tea but allowing people to enjoy it much sooner. In those days, the raw material used to make puerh was very, very inexpensive (especially compared to these days), so they didn’t mind such compromises. Factories wanted to speed this up even quicker, inspired by the artificial fermentation that was already well established in the black tea industry of next door Guangxi, which produces Liu Bao. Liu Bao and Yunnan had already been exchanging raw material and ideas for decades, so it came as no surprise that researchers from factories in Yunnan would one day show up in Liu Bao to study the artificial fermentation there. Of course, they had to adapt the process because the varieties, trees and leaves of Yunnan are different from Liu Bao and other black teas, and also, perhaps more importantly, the microbial ecology is very different. The “microbial terroir” is why various kinds of beer in Germany, wines in France or even Mao Tai alcohol in China were not reproducible elsewhere, despite many attempts to replicate famous examples. The same is true of cheeses, which will be very different when fermented in different places, even if the milk and cultures are the same.

The main difference between the piling of shou and other black teas is that the piles are deeper, wetter and hotter. The thicker, larger leaves of big-leaf Yunnanese puerh require a deeper pile and the wetness perhaps was inspired by the “traditional” wet storage—shou puerh is, in fact, the wettest of the wet storage. Wetter piles also work faster. Finally, the factories in Yunnan added the thermal blanket to increase the speed and degree of fermentation.

It may go without saying that the puerh factories were not successful in reproducing in a month what Nature makes in seventy years. Like “traditional” wet storage, the shou process of artificially fermenting (piling/composting) the tea reduces its quality in terms of flavor, and even more so in Qi, sacrificing much of the energy of the mountain and tree. What they were successful in achieving was adding complexity to puerh by creating a sub-genre that needs to be understood and evaluated on its own terms. You really cannot compare shou to sheng in any meaningful way, whether the sheng is young or aged. Shou is a genre with its own life, qualities and profile in the cup.

Quality in Loose-Leaf Puerh

Those of you who bought the shou puerh Expansion Pack last November will remember that we explained that Bindbole and Shaman's Drum are both such rare and amazing teas because they are unblended (over time; they were blended upon production). Most of the time when you find such a tea, it was either stored privately or held by very few owners (only two in the case of those teas). Otherwise, most all loose-leaf puerh will be a blend of vintages. As we stressed throughout this discussion, this means that you cannot use the age to evaluate most loose-leaf puerh teas. In fact, we often encourage merchants to move away from dates when listing loose-leaf teas unless they are sure of the date, stored the tea themselves or have some other reliable information about the vintage. Even in such cases, the customer would still have to trust the vendor or have the experience to recognize the fact that the tea is, in fact, unblended over time. We think it is more honest and clear to create some other kind of system for expressing quality in aged loose-leaf puerh, perhaps using terms like "aged," "well-aged," "vintage" or "antique," all of which could be used to talk about the relative quality of the tea, even if it is a blend.

And relative scale really is the best way to mark quality in aged loose-leaf puerh, whether sheng or shou. In other words, one has to drink more of these teas and create a whole scale of quality that applies only to aged loose-leaf puerh, comparing one to the other. Usually, when we drink the so-called "aged sheng" blends, the age of the aged sheng is relatively older as we move up in quality and price. But, as we mentioned earlier, these teas are usually blends of aged sheng, younger wet-stored sheng and a bit of shou. Consequently, the quality can be driven up by adding older aged sheng, older young wet-stored sheng, older shou, any combination of these, or perhaps the whole blend was not tampered with for some time and is therefore more aged.

As one drinks more aged loose-leaf puerh, one realizes that you cannot really evaluate these teas in terms of age, as you would for compressed teas that actually have a vintage. Quality is not so easily determined with such teas. You really have to drink a lot of them and start to create some scale of price/quality which is internal to the genre and relative to all the others, understanding how such tea is bought, blended and sold and knowing what such teas should cost in the market. There are the exceptions, like Bindbole or our Tea of the Month, where we can be much more certain of the vintage for some reason (usually a single collector we trust), but in most cases we cannot rely on the date of the tea, as blending and storage influence the experience.

We should state once again that the lack of vintage in these loose-leaf teas need not be considered "fake" or negative in any way. It is actually a positive thing from a certain perspective, because it means that such teas are much more affordable. It is difficult to keep anything for decades. A mint condition antique may be worth a fortune more than a dinged or dented version of the same, and if you are an ordinary person, you may have to choose between owning the dented version or none at all. If you love aged tea, you may indeed have to choose between drinking loose-leaf tea or none at all, as cakes with vintage can be incredibly expensive (you can also age tea yourself, which we suggest doing). Once you accept that the storage is never as good in aged loose-leaf puerh, and that it is often blended over time, making the dates unreliable, you can learn to recognize what makes one such tea cost more than another, to evaluate the genre with discernment, and, most importantly to enjoy sharing these teas in your sessions, as aged puerh is amongst the most powerful and meditative of all teas, and for many of us, drinking loose-leaf is the only way we can afford to share puerh tea with our friends, families and community.

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茶 Storing loose-leaf puerh is great, as it ages faster than compressed tea, which means we can create a fine tea within a lifetime. We like to fill up jars with nice loose-leaf sheng or shou and cover the top with cloth to let in air, while keeping out particulates. We store the jars in places with low humidity so the tea doesn't mold.



茶 Samadhi

安止定

Samadhi is a beautiful tea filled with bright, calming energy that centers you—perfect for an issue about Tea, Zen and meditation. It is difficult to find truly clean, chemical-free shou puerh tea, since it is often made up of left-overs, and usually from various regions. This shou is made from a small batch of better leaves, including old-growth. Usually shou puerh doesn't have any old-growth tea in it because tea from old trees is very expensive and the piling reduces the quality and essence of the tea, which is a shame. Using such tea would also mean that the sheng and shou versions would have to be sold for the same price, which is very challenging for a producer. Part of why Samadhi is able to contain old-growth tea and still remain affordable is that the leaves are larger, lower-down, thinner and bigger leaves, called “*huang pian* (黃片).” In our Tea of the Month, these were blended with other kinds of leaves, bringing a nice, balanced flavor.

Huang pian are essentially the leaves left on the tree to grow. They are often sorted out of tea, whether puerh or other kinds like oolong, in post-production. Tea pickers are often paid by the weight of what they have picked in a day, and therefore often ignore the instructions of the foreman and pick larger leaves to increase the weight of their bags/baskets with less effort. In oolong production, such larger, thinner leaves turn yellow in processing, which is why they are called “*huang pian*,” which literally means “yellow piece.” As leaves grow, their cells stretch out and become photosynthesizers. From a more traditional perspective, you could say that the emerging buds are the outward Yang expression of the tree's energy from the root up and out, whereas the older leaves are taking energy inwards and are older and more Yin. Since the leaves are stretched out, it means they are far less juicy, thinner and more brittle when dried. They lack the vibrancy of younger leaves, which is why they are rarely used in tea production. Such leaves are often kept by the farmers and served in the household as a result. Since these leaves were not used in more premium cakes, they were often blended into loose-leaf teas like Samadhi.

In puerh, *huang pian* also age faster. The thinness of the leaves means they decompose quickly, like autumn leaves in climates with four seasons, which turn brown and decompose very quickly. In fact, *huang pian* puerh like our Tea of the Month has flavors reminiscent of our childhood days playing in such leaf piles. It pleasantly reminds us of autumn afternoons as children, frolicking in the raked piles of leaves. Such fragrances and nuances are warming for the soul.

Samadhi is also special because it was only ever owned by one merchant, whom we know and trust. He bought a quantity of it in the late '90s, since it was cheap and would age fast due to the *huang pian* in the blend. Samadhi is rich and bright, with a clarity not usually present in puerh, especially shou. This is also due to the older leaves. The softness and clarity of the liquor also translates to the energy, which is Yin and calming. This is a quiet tea, without any fancy cymbals or fireworks in the mouth, leaving you and your guests clear, which is often so needed in our busy lives. May it foster a meditative session for all of you!



Gongfu

Sidehandle

Water: spring water or best bottled
Fire: coals, infrared or gas
Heat: as hot as possible, fish-eye, 95 °C
Brewing Methods: gongfu or sidehandle (they make different brews)
Steeping: longer, flash, flash, then growing (you can only get one flash)
Patience: twenty steepings

茶 Use more leaves than you are used to with most teas. The *huang pian* in this blend make it less patient and also lighter. You won't regret leaning on the strong side.

Brewing Tips

Samadhi is made of thinner, softer huang pian leaves. Such tea is not as patient or as strong as you are used to in a shou puerh, especially one this old. In order to make a deep and satisfying brew, you will have to use a few more leaves than you are used to. We all may have fewer sessions this month, but they will be deep and meditative. This applies to such blends in general—they become deeper, brighter, thicker and more patient when you add a bit more than with other kinds of similarly aged puerh. You'll be glad you went a bit stronger with this tea. Of course, as with all aged sheng and shou puerh, temperature will be important to bring the best out of this tea as well. For that reason, you will want the water to be at a boil and have a penetrating heat. We always recommend charcoal for teas such as Samadhi, as it will create a deeper, brighter brew with a longer, lingering aftertaste and more powerful Qi As well. But don't feel like you need charcoal to successfully prepare this tea.

This month we would also like to offer some pouring tips, both from the kettle and from the teapot. Whether you are brewing this tea sidehandle or gongfu, aged sheng and shou puerhs require more temperature. For

that reason, it is always ideal to fill the pot as quickly as possible and from as low as possible. Try bringing your kettle in as close as possible and creating as large a stream as you can, steeping the tea as quickly as you are able to. Your ability to do this may be influenced by your kettle and its spout. The best kettles afford us more range in distance and speed of pour, like teapots. The shorter distance means the stream of water loses less heat, fills the pot quickly and the water is less affected by the air during the pour. We always keep moving as we fill the teapot, so we do not scald any of the leaves. Since this is a quicker pour, we have to move a bit faster in circles as well, at least until the water is above the leaves. You can experiment to see whether a shorter distance and quicker pour improves your tea from steeping to steeping.

When pouring from the pot, we always pour onto the sides of the cup or bowl. This prevents the tea from rippling and bubbling. Bubbles in tea make the liquor rough and dissipate Qi. You can experiment from steeping to steeping, pouring on the edge versus splashing into the center of the cup or bowl, and pay attention to the difference, using the Ten Qualities of a Fine tea as your guide.

