

***Jingmai's Fabled Tea Forests***  
***-One of Puerh's great tea towns revealed-***



The town is a casual mess of motorcycles, errant dogs desperate to be left alone, and human bodies carrying sacks over their shoulders. Green pick-ups are jam packed with tea negotiating the little street which seems not to have expanded at the same rate as business. Jingmai in mid-March is happily 'mad' with the spring tea harvest – which is just finishing. Few of Asia's tea bastions can so be so languid and frenetic at the same time. It has the same buzz as 'one-product' towns throughout the world. Villages of the 'grape' would recognize the energy and pulse and the absolute need to get the green leaves dried, sorted, and sold. The Spring harvest is a month and a half of tea fuelled mayhem and it is for this reason that I have come. Seventy kilometers west of Menghai

The Dai people, Jingmai's ancient landholders, are neat in movement and the women's bright sarongs shimmy as move carving little lines through town. A tea producer I'd met before apologizes for not having time to host me for tea as he is entirely wrapped up in his own sacks of tea. He is barely visible, surrounded by 20 kg bags of the precious old tree teas that have made him wealthy. As famous for its policy of open doors and generosity as it is for its tea, southern Yunnan becomes a place of drama and high intensity during the harvest season. Prices have steadily increased, houses have grown and the mighty leaf of Jingmai has only expanded its stimulant powers.

Joining me on my little Puerh venture into the tea's very forests is Yi-San, a local buyer and sampler. Her mother has also joined us and though nearly blind of eye, seems able to spot a fraudulent tea at a hundred meters. Our itinerary is a simple one. We will track down a local tea seller, sip some of her tea, eat with her family and then repeat the process at two other homes. We aren't alone, as the population has swelled with tea buyers, wholesalers and middlemen piling into the little town which sits on the side of a tea mountain. Huge 4x4's line the already stuffed streets and while there is a general lightness of spirit here, there is also the unmistakable edge of business. Smiles run the range between completely insincere to jackal-like, but the locals are in full control of proceedings as it is their wonderful teas that all have come for.

Our first contact comes out to greet us. She is a pocket-sized beauty whose rough hands and smoky voice add to her charisma - not to mention that she has deeper tea-knowledge than most alive. People here in this region pick tea from an age when they can walk and hold a bottle and if they have a good mind - and better trees - they can become a minor 'god' of the tea world, selling the precious spring harvest. Clearly ripped on tea and excited by the current business rush, our little hostess races through the streets screaming at friends, greeting others but all the while hustling and leading us to her home. Time and tea are kings here and she doesn't waste a spare movement. She wears an indigenous dress in bright pink under which are a pair of running shoes that add to her diminutive stature. Her eyes blaze intelligence and intensity and there something immediately attractive about her simultaneously considered and devil-may-care approach to life.

Yi-San greets this stunning little tea boss and I have that wonderful sense that though men dominate the landscape, there is a self-supporting network of women who make things happen. Climbing through the bags of tea of her home, we walk past 5 women - all of whom appear to be over seventy-years old - sorting through tea leaves. One woman gives us a little wave followed by one of those glorious toothless smiles that seem the domain of 'ancients'. Up three flights of stairs and not one stair has taken me out of the site (and scent) of tea. It is a place entirely dominated by a small green leaf that the locals call 'la'. We follow our pink-clad hostess up to an enormous fourth floor tea house and I feel the slight throbbing of my tongue that always is a precursor to drinking tea. A slight spike in my pulse also marks my addict's need as I'm suddenly impatient for a dose of my green love.

The tea house is quite literally the entire top floor of our hostesses' home. It isn't immaculate, but rather 'worn' and warm, and the very tiles of the floor seem to exhale tea's earthy green breath. In the words of an old - and similarly addicted - friend, Jingmai's old tea trees produced teas that were impossible not to like. The local teas were 'light', encouraging the mouth to explore their subtleties. Many actively disliked Jingmai for what they perceived as its lack of bite, but in fact it was the one tea that I'd seen slowly win over the most ardent drinkers of 'hard' explosive teas. It was in my own estimation a 'sleeper' of a tea that created flavors in the mouth and if properly produced was seldom disappointing. This last point,

production, was an aspect of Jingmai's tea history that was enviable. Jingmai's tea producers had long mastered high quality production of an already outstanding tea and the ensuing teas were predictable and expectations were always high, with the predictable big price tags. Prices this year for the top teas are over \$600.00 US a kilogram and with some families producing 1000 kg's it makes for lucrative 'little-big' tea business.

Our little tea fireball in pink is like a piston serving tea, all the while talking, pointing and even – and this impresses as much as anything – going into her little purse which hangs from her neck, for a wad of money for her brother. The brother it seems got all of the stature in the family, built as he is like a prizefighter. He sits with us using a water pipe to take in huge burbling doses of tobacco smoke taking huge inhalations of tea.

Tea and its long liquid fingers seem to spread to not only the immediate surroundings but also into the very psyche of people and bringing them together. Business, money and relationships are as vital – and fluid – as the tea itself. To understand this, it takes a visit to the source of it all to fully grasp what tea is and what it means. Tea is beyond all else a medicinal foodstuff and a thing of the earth rather than simply a distant leaf of esthetic glory.

As I ponder all of this imponderable stuff, action takes place in much the same way everything seems to happen in the tea regions: without warning. True to form though, the action isn't what I expect. It isn't a visit to another tea house as had been proposed, but rather a quick drive to the nearby Mangjing Ancient tea tree forest which is a massive and almost sacred green-space of nothing but tea trees. Said another way, we are going to where all of the green goodness comes from.

A few kilometers away is a world away. The forest of tea trees *is* the forest. Gentle things, bent things, climbing things, and all of them are tea trees. Yi-San simply sits down amid the trees and beckons to her mother to join her. Mother, though has other ideas and is up a tree in seconds looking at the tea leaves in the heights. Having slightly smaller leaves than the monster leaves of further east, the tea species itself here in Jingmai is different from many of the other tea forests of Xishuangbanna though still part of the Yunnan big leaf family. I wander contentedly though the draped figures of the trees which create a kind of roof over the pathways. The forest is protected by law and while it is a shame that laws must be in place, if it protects the mighty forests then all continues along in green peace. Pulang, Dai, Lahu and Hani people reside in the areas but there are careful regulations as to whom can actually sell and 'call' their teas a 'Jingmai'. Only residents of Jingmai, or those who harvest and produce their teas in and from Jingmai might label their product as such. Similar regulations are in place throughout southern Yunnan's vast tea belt to ensure that fakes, copies, and outright lying about teas is limited.

Many of the tea trees bare the adornments of parasitic orchids that weave their way around the trunks and branches in a kind of elegant dress. Moving through this

massive garden of stimulant joy it again strikes me how crucial the 'source' is. Without it, how can one even conceive of what tea – or for that matter, anything – really is. Above me too visible and audible are tea harvesters high in the tea trees above me clipping the tea leaves in the standard 'one bud and two leaves' format. All of the pickers on this day are women covered in big sun hats to protect themselves against the raging sun. The women hurl out laughs, songs, and comments to other harvesters and the whole process, while labor intensive, has the very 'social' energy that I've long associated with tea in these parts.

A local tea producer has invited us to his tea production plant later in the day. Yi-San is impressed. The little factory is immaculate and two women sit sorting leaves chatting in the nasally pitches of the local Dai people (whose language and culture mirror much of the Thai people to the not-distant south). Racks of tea lie slowly withering on the first floor and a massive covered rooftop provides a final drying space for the tea. Our host is a lean handsome man with quick eyes - and apparently - stunning teas. The teas we are served are in fact stunning, though the whole debate about 'great' teas is at times entirely moot. Twelve people at the same tea table sampling the same tea at the same moment will 'feel' and taste a tea entirely differently. What I do know about the tea that we sip, is that it hits with soft power and encases the mouth with some of Jingmai's famed subtle touches. It has also been well produced which is perhaps one of the less-stated but infinitely vital elements of a good tea. Too high a frying heat, too much time in the sun, not enough aeration, or simply a lethargic fryer can all adversely affect a classic tea in waiting. For all of the commotion made about the harvesting space of a particular tea, all will be wasted if the production isn't up to standard and produced with the same attention that the tea trees and bushes have put into 'hosting' them.

Heaving in yet another sampling of tea, there is another of those wonderfully sudden moments when without warning a decision is made. Our lean host decides it is time to eat. He tells me that a good tea not only helps digestion, but it also prepares the digestive track for an upcoming meal. He presses a bag of tea into me telling me that it is a gift. I do not even make the pretense of attempting to say "no".

Dinner could be summed up as "every possible thing local", including a spicy dish of chilies and tea leaves. It is a huge feast that seems to gain momentum with local friends from the tea community showing up and joining us for dinner. Tea stained hands from clipping the leaves, fryer's hands rough with the dark 'extra layer', sun-kissed faces and the warm smell of sun all join at a huge round table that fairly oozes with vegetation, mountain chicken, and leaves.

Following dinner, tea is again served up and somehow despite the festive environment, the tea acts as a kind of tonic. This year's leaves are discussed, the prices are spoken of, and the world of the green leaf inevitably reigns supreme once more. In this part of the world, the word tea in whatever language is spoken is rarely out of site or mind.





*High above the forest floor a tea picker harvests in a tea tree that is hundreds of years old within the Mangjing Ancient tea tree forest.*



*The Dai people have long produced teas and are the guardians of the ancient tea tree forests along with the Hani the Lahu, the Pulang, and Wa peoples.*



*Glorious piles of Jingmai tea lie drying in piles. Teas from Jingmai are often sold before they are even finished drying. Trusted producers take orders on yet to come seasons and are often 'sold out' before a season even begins.*



*Business is brisk in the little town of Jingmai during the Spring Harvest. Here a seller and producer carries 20 kg's of his latest creation to a customer's vehicle directly.*



*A spring harvest of Jingmai lies withering before it will be fired. Jingmai's Spring teas are one of four region teas that are the most waited for within the Puer communities.*



*Jingmai's Mangjing tea forests are protected by law and any disturbing of the forests or attempts to 'fake' local tea are met with immediate and often violent retribution.*

*Elder Dai women carefully sort through the tea leaves taking out leaves or any refuse that is unsightly or of inferior quality.*

