

## The Fry



*The hands of a master begin the frying process. Mr. Mi reminds of the law of frying: "to rest the hands is to burn the leaves".*

China has long kept a kind of endearing monopoly of its cultivation, creation and production secrets of teas much like a master chef will often leave out one crucial ingredient or detail when they pass along a favourite recipe. It perhaps should be this way that the 'old world' tea sanctuaries can keep something of their secrets.

In the case of tea in China, some traditions have vanished entirely, while others have moved off-shore to be perfected (as with steaming in Japan) and further enhanced; while some ideas were stolen, but many more have remained nicely hidden in the Middle Kingdom.

Staring, smelling, and longing to shove my face in the green churning mess in front of me, one such tradition that hasn't gone anywhere is being played out with a powerful churning of hands: the fry! Here the fry is entirely as it should be: manual, meticulous, and only a touch of casual fervency.

Tucked deep in the Bulang Mountains of southern Yunnan, I'm nicely ripped on a tea that was served 20 minutes ago. As sated as I thought I might be, this frying of fresh tea leaves in a huge fire-fed pan and the sweet green steam that emanates from the pan is creating another thirst deep in me. The fragrance clings to the air as it is

shoved this way and that by a light breeze. The gloved hands prevent any burning of flesh and provides a slightly gentler approach to the still fragile leaves.

Whereas in Japan, tea remains entirely and wonderfully green through steaming and gentle coercion, in China the process of frying is to - in some way - add another layer without destroying or manipulating too much of a good tea's original brilliance. This is particularly true of newly harvested Puerhs which retain something of the very earth from which they have come. That very earthiness and 'terra-influence' in a tea is what can define a tea's character, and a fry that does anything other than enhance that strength is not a good fry!

Where Japan is almost divinely rigid in its adherence to rituals, the regions of southern Yunnan have retained a kind of cowboy 'hit or miss' technique. Before me is a practitioner, a master manipulator and master fryer of the green who is both instinctive and divinely strict about his fries. It is the best of both worlds encased in one being, that I've long been almost obsessed with. Years ago when visiting this very home (which was significantly smaller), I recall sitting and watching this same pair of hands fry, though the skill level then was nothing as to what it is now. Mr. Mi is soft about everything in life and has a kind of languid and unhurried pace to him...except when it comes to his teas.

There is crackling as bits of moisture ooze out of the leaves and onto the hot surface of the massive pan. Mr. Mi has forearms that are entirely out of scale with his body. Sinuous and thick with many successive harvests and years behind him the thick cords of muscle are the result of a lifetime of frying.

From the Hani people (known as the Akha in Thailand and Myanmar) Mr. Mi has a calm intensity, with little need for words. Perspiration lines his head and his primed moustache twitches once in a while but he is totally lost in an intense zone of effort and intention. All around us cicadas have made the hot air alive with their sound and there isn't even a hint of wind.

As Mr. Mi's constant motion churns and massages the leaves, the already withered leaves have remaining humidity and moisture purged from them. Too rough a massage and the leaves get bruised, setting off a reaction that will destroy the taste. It is the fry where a tea has much of its 'taste' (though 'flavour' might more properly describe the sensation) fixed. It is a vital stage that seems to remain an almost forgotten element in a tea's final unveiling. A fry is an element that can in a millisecond of too much heat or laziness destroy a fantastic tea. It is a stage that can enhance a questionable harvest into something wonderful. It is, in its very simplicity the creationist stage for a great tea. One can speak about a tea's rarity, its delicate hues, or its potent power...all of these are enhanced, improved or adulterated by the application of heat but all can be instantly eliminated by a blast of unneeded heat.

Mr. Mi is the only person in his family of 8 that fries. This is his domain down below the home where special wood is stacked beside two huge pans. It is where the

precious teas will be dumped to be withered, lumped into the pans, friend, taken out and further purged of humidity through kneading. It is from here too that the tea leaves will be taken to the roof to be dried.

For three main times of every year this is where Mr. Mi is entirely in his dominion. Only a son-in-law shows any signs of showing the necessary finesse, skills and care to be trained. His wife runs virtually all of the picking and harvesting while a daughter is something of a do-it-all, zipping to and fro.

Such is Mr. Mi's skills that his teas are often sold 'sight-unseen' a year in advance of even being harvested. His skills honed year after year and have been sampled to such a degree that for many his 'signature' or the knowledge that he has produced a particular teas as essential as the region's name that appears on a tea cake.

After a day of assisting and observing I am – as I am every evening – invited for a few cups of tea with Mr. Mi upstairs alone. He retires every evening to sip of a previous harvest of his own creation, telling me “it is necessary to see how your own tea ages. How else can you know your own?”

Stripping himself of his cotton gloves, which carry the tannins of his latest work, he first carefully washes his face and neck with a wet cloth. Work temporarily done he is finally free to rest (which for him constitutes sipping).

Beckoning and quiet, he mulls over the cakes and woven baskets of teas before us. Reaching into a wicker basket that is covered in only a small lid he pulls out some leaves readying them in a simple glass pot. Pointing at them as we sit (still alone) he explains to me that they are from a Spring 2010 summer harvest that was by his account a stunner.

He goes on that the tea in question, though not a lauded Spring harvest, is one of his favourites. His reason: “It was a good fry that year and a great harvest”. It is by his account one that no one in his family dispute.

The village around us which is perched on a small hillock is gently resting from its tea labours. Small streams of smoke weave their way up into the sky and the odd voice rings through it all.

Preparing the tea I prompt Mr. Mi to speak more of the frying and like any great preparer the information he imparts is slightly vague. There are no exact times, or temperatures, but rather there are feelings and senses.

“First there has to be a gradual increase in the temperature of the pan. Smoke can never touch or come close to the frying leaves. When the pan is at the correct heat the leaves are dumped in and it begins”.

There is nothing more said about it, other than he knows when he has gotten a batch right, and when he hasn't. Once the leaves are heated, becoming supple and timid and coming to a soft and very much decreased size, the rest is a 'feeling'.

The tea before me which is served up is a slightly darker version, having darkened over years, will in time become darker still. What the mouth feels is a vegetal brew that is ever so tinged with a rust or iron tinge. This in turn gives way to something sweet before plunging away down the gorge.

"The best teas are either because of consistency or complete accidents", he tells me and I ask whether this tea was the former or latter. He smiles and says nothing offering up a second round of his favourite.



*After less than ten minutes at a medium heat, the leaves have shrunk having their moisture removed.*

*If the leaves remain too long resting upon the hot pan, they burn and if they burn the entire batch can be ruined. A good producer will not sell a ruined batch.*





*Families from remote villages producing tea will now often invest in two fryers side by side so that the entire process can be more quickly finished. Good teas are not over-harvested but rather produced in roughly the same yield quantities year after year and season after season.*

*The last process before sun and shade drying for Puerh is the expunging or 'kneading' out of the remaining moisture after the fry.*





*After frying a load of tea sits ready for drying. At this point a tea will actually have most of its tastes or flavours fixed within it and if done properly, it will be a masterpiece.*