

Ma'ley

A Disappearing Naxi Tradition of Tea Preparation



Lijiang's long role in Yunnan province as a kind of 'in-between' market town of colour, flare, copper, and leather has given way to the ways of modern tourism. During the times of trade (more than a thousand years of it) the Tibetans referred to it as the happy market town of 'Sadem'. All manner of goods could be acquired and all manner of men and women transported these goods. Go-between towns had a bit of swagger about them, a bit of mystery and tea was being passed through it in huge amounts.

The indigenous Naxi were nomads who moved into the Lijiang valley, finding peace, fertile grounds, and a safe haven from harassing Tibetans and other ethnic groups. The Naxi, their culture, language, and even their tea has been of the 'middle ground' with traditions that have reflected (but not entirely copied) the traditions of the borderlands around them.

My own time in Lijiang's 'evolved' pandemonium of close to 6 million domestic tourists a year, I've found a nook of Naxi culture that reflects a little more authentic

culture and a little less frenetic pace...and a tradition of serving tea that I can well imagine disappearing in no time.

West of Lijiang, I sit next to a young woman who simply calls herself No'la. Around me, lean 'mountain' chickens strut about in a kind of hyper-active state, amidst sun flower seed shells and dust. Skies above are bolt blue and the air has the clean cold wafts that are carried from the nearby Hengduan Mountains, which act as an entry point to the eastern Himalayas. The Tea Horse Road had passed within these regions on its long and daunting journey northwest into the Himalayas. We are not far from the huge spires and altitudes of the great mountains. While the tea leaves themselves varied little amid this part of Yunnan, the methods of mixing and consuming them did.

No'la has a kind of typically local 'shy-but-proud' spirit about her as she explains one of the tea world's very rare tea concoctions whose proponents and preparers are fast disappearing. No'la explains carefully that "youth don't take much interest in Naxi culture", and rather prophetically tells me "this tea tradition will die out soon". Though not yet 30, No'la speaks with the jaded gravity of an elder who has already seen the signs. She sits crushing hemp seeds (which grow almost casually here in northwest Yunnan) with a mortar and pestle. Around her are a number of other incredible ingredients besides hemp seeds that will be added to this 'tea' mix: peanuts, a massive chunk of butter, egg, salt, a bowl of ground chilli peppers, and dried tea leaves.

This Naxi tradition of tea preparation is known as **Ma'ley**, and though it reminds me a little of the fiercely potent Tibetan butter tea preparations, it is something entirely unto itself, with far more ingredients to enter into the equation. Though my palate has long preferred simple un-processed teas, this little harmony of additions hints at something curious and wonderful.

No'la's small frame belies a pair of powerful hands. Her movements are slow, methodical and entirely 'crushing'. After her crushing of the hemp seeds, the peanuts then get the same treatment being carefully pulverized until they too are nothing but a fine-grain pile of dust. The peanuts are then put into a separate bowl. All of this 'work' reminds me of one of tea's innate bits of timeless value: one needs time to prepare it, time to consume it, and in this there can be no substitutes. The very number of ingredients here in particular seems to enhance this 'ancient' and timeless wisdom. I wait.

The Tibetans have long been proponents of the 'tea as food' ideal. Butter, barley powder and even salt have been added to create a liquid caloric masterpiece, perfect to replace what is lost and sate thirsts in the highest of highlands.

This concoction before me emphasizes this notion that tea can be a base from which to work from. Entirely necessary but also only 'one amid many flavours'. Hemp, long known as a medicine and relaxant for locals; peanuts adding a bit of protein; butter,

the calories; salt to rehydrate; and egg for a little more of a 'protein addition'...and then of course the crowning bit of beauty: the tea itself.

Around this little space that No'la and I occupy, along with all of the ingredients, women from the local town (which is a mix of both Naxi and Bai indigenous peoples) pass by, taking little glimpses at the action. Perhaps they too have already forgotten the preparation of this Ma'ley.

No'la has all of the ingredients in various bags and containers – a veritable plethora of this region's old world items. A dog passes by, wags a bored tale and after seeing nothing of interest moves on in search of something more substantial. Evidently, this Ma'ley holds little interest.

A small bag of locally grown tea sits as though reminding that this preparation is still about tea, regardless of how many other ingredients are lined up waiting for the 'plunge'. My wait continues

Hemp and peanuts, ground down and at the ready wait as No'la readies the wooden cylinder that I'm more familiar with for Tibetan butter tea. Peanuts, hemp, chili peppers, butter are all put in. Amounts are rough guesses rather than anything precise. Nearby a kettle burbles its little song and a copper tea pot has dried tea leaves put into it.

No'la is now smiling as she works and pulls this masterpiece of tea diversity together. Such is the range of ingredients that I cannot fathom what this eccentric band of ingredients will create...

As I continue to watch, tea in this Ma'ley form seems to blend into a mix that is medicine, food, stimulant, and ceremony all at once. Here as the altitudes begin to climb, tea's purpose becomes an all-conquering source of caloric fuel. It becomes far more than simply a liquid result infused with tea's life-giving properties; it becomes a more efficient version of an "all-in-one".

Once water has boiled it is poured into the copper kettle with the awaiting tea leaves eager to add their own wonderful stain into this blend. The amount of tea leaves (a rough handful) ensures that its bitter blessings will not be wiped out by the various additions but rather serve to add some bite.

Then, the kettle with tea is placed atop a burner and brought to a boil for a few minutes. The tea becomes more of a powerful stew, and then – and only then – is it added to the cylinder of hemp, peanuts, and a smidgen of the chili peppers. No'la uses the plunger to gently bludgeon the mixture together. A glob of butter, and some

salt are added. Again the plunger does its work forcing the ingredients together. At last, the final addition – two raw eggs that were collected this very morning – is ready. Quickly and without a fuss the eggs are broken and they too are mixed in.

I wonder how much more the cylinder can handle in terms of ingredients. It gurgles and chortles as No'la relentlessly plunges the ingredients into...I don't know what. It is a grand and almost monstrous alchemic experiment that has me entirely enthralled.

No'la continues her production by presenting up homemade bread patties in preparation for the first sip. I care not for the well-meaning 'solid' food. I only care that at long last I might sip or eat of this wonderful mess. She allows a smile to reach her mouth. The Naxi, like their distant cousins the Mosuo and the Yi people practice matrilineal ownership, so that property is inherited or passed down through the mother's line. Women here traditionally have had much say in a family's affairs and No'la's power and pride have worked towards this moment.

A large bowl that is frothy, chunky, and strangely 'fluid' is poured out with No'la's expression appearing almost motherly. She tells me simply to drink. It has always impressed and humbled that so much time and effort can be put into something, only to consume the result in quick seconds.

The sip is more tentative than forceful. Texture isn't something I normally worry about but the addition of raw eggs have made the strangely wonderful taste seem like a secondary effect. Another taste...all has come together and become something else, something with all of effects but none of the particularities of the ingredients. It is a masterpiece in that in such a short time, all elements have contributed to the taste. It is also a credit to No'la that it has worked. The result feels more 'mealish' than it does 'liquidish'. The hemp and peanuts have added a layer of nuttiness without taking over and the butter has acted as an adhesive in the blend soothing all sharp tastes and providing a kind of backbone. And of course the tea leaves – simple green leaves of the small leaf varietal – have done what they always do: inject some bitter green.

No'la sips her own bowl satisfied, without me having uttering the slightest word. She knows it is something very special, this Ma'ley.



An unlikely addition to tea: hemp seeds sit ready to be ground.



Both hemp seeds and peanuts get ground up for Ma'LeY. Both addcaloric and medicinal aspects to an already 'busy' tea.



Vital and eternal- tea leaves are added to a kettle and will be prepared on the side before being added to the main ingredients.



Strong tea is poured through a strainer into the main cylinder which contains all of the rest of the ingredients of this 'smorgasbord' of elements.



Butter tea with the addition of ground hemp seeds, ground peanuts, salt and even raw egg is added to the main tea kettle for a 're-heating'.