

Long Jing - To the Source



A master's hands with his latest Spring masterpiece: a recent Long Jing harvest finishing off its second of three roastings.

Some smells soothe and grab, hitting some deeper place in the bones while others struggle to make any impression at all. The former is encasing me now as sweet wafts shoot into my center inundating every cell. Frank and I are packed into a small narrow space just outside of Hangzhou, Zhejiang where one of China's great tea classics is grown and produced. The little man that we lather over and move around is huddled over heat with his hands churning within a giant pan. It is his activity that has created this scent of soft cream. Within a pan before him, a surprisingly sparse amount of leaves are being treated to a second of their third roastings. We have come to this little bastion of green tea south of Shanghai to see what is left of a tea tradition involving a tea that I've rarely consumed (and when have consumed haven't quite fully appreciated).

Dragon Well or Long Jing green is known beyond simply those who drink it. It is a kind of reference point in traditional Chinese culture. Deeply embedded in the psyche it is a point of deferential pride in the province of Zhejiang and one of the great historic light green offerings of tea culture. Long Jing is one of the most creatively falsified and faked teas on the planet...a disgrace but success in this part of the world brings with it the caveat that it will be copied simply because it can be and most drinkers will not be able to determine a legitimate Long Jing from a fake. I

have been on that vaunted list of being duped. Now, here, just a meter away from the most legitimate Long Jing I will find, I feel somehow avenged.

Frank is another with serious tea fever that wants to actually be in the zones that produce the teas that he sells, sips, and slavers over. Both of us have packed lightly but each of us have our standard necessities, which includes a load of our preferred teas just in case. He has his complicated Darjeeling's of incredible craftsmanship and I have my raw green Puerhs that stun with fresh green layers....just in case mind you. We are both creatures of ritual and for me, contemplating starting a day – any day – without my big-leafed Puerh is something bleak.

Frank and I shuffled into Hangzhou's enormous green space the night before by train from Shanghai, slightly worn and shaken. Fast trains may be fast but they remove one from the visceral, whisking us from Shanghai's utter hugeness into fields that we blur through in a time scarcely imaginable. We are distraught, dismayed, and impressed at the size of Hangzhou, a city that was never on either of our collective maps...other than of course beyond the fact that it was home to Long Jing. We are here for it and it only. It is the beginning of a two-week odyssey to visit and imbibe from China's famed tea regions. Beginning in the south-east of China where Oolongs and dark smoky Souchongs were sourced and sent by schooner to Europe and Taiwan, and on westward to my old haunts in Yunnan where I still feel that tea is akin to something more of the earth. With the indigenous speed, and the old trees and remote villages the region of southwest, Yunnan will provide a finale for the journey.

Where Frank and I stand in this little box of a room with its narcotic green baking scent, is beyond the city center thankfully. Tea's two absolute requisites in my slightly obsessive mind are the source of the leaves, and the hands that usher the leaves along and create it. Much like in the fabled wine regions of France there is a push (though how successful is still a question) to geographically and technically designate what makes a particular tea, a particular tea. The Long Jing of most tea stores isn't a Long Jing in terms of where it is made, where the leaves are harvested, or even how it is made. Anyone can take a green leaf, flatten it, randomly roast it and serve it up as a Long Jing.

Close to the village of Long Wu, our little master and his clan of 23 make up most of the village. Their days are spent with the leaf, thinking about the leaf, preparing for its harvest, and ultimately caring for the leaves like the children they are. It is a world entirely revolving around Long Jing tea. Their entire harvest is already spoken for and there will of course be grades and levels of tea but what makes this particular garden-unit special is that all of their production is undertaken in a small artisanal approach. The small amount of leaves in the pan that our master is preparing will amount to roughly 200 grams of tea. No huge vats and pans of 5 kg's at a time here...no, no. Here the standard production sizes are tiny, ensuring a wide and vaunted consistency so that every single leaf seems singled out for special attention. His teas will cost anywhere from one-hundred to eight-hundred dollars a

kilogram and will be treated to a kind of worship by the drinkers that purchase it. Long Jing is one of those teas that cannot be infused multiple times. It is akin to a wonderful touch of something that one can sip once at one strength in one glass and then it is done until another dose of leaves gets another infusion. For me this is special but extremely limiting as the Oolongs and Puerhs that own me are like seasons; they develop, ebb, flow, open up, and then disappear. Opinions and palates rage over these kinds of questions and perhaps they aren't really important. What is important is that we are at the source.

We have been referred to this little man and his household by Miss Ling who knows exactly what we are after: small gardens that still adhere to small batch production; families who can count back generations of tea 'handlers'; those that still see and sip tea as a part of something far more profound than simply an economic exercise...and so, here we are.

Frank keeps moaning as he too is taking the scent deep into his nasal passages and his sounds are those of approval. It is a sumptuous cream smell that infuses every particle and we are a very appreciative audience of two to this man who has for 50 years been involved in all aspects of Long Jing tea. His authenticity represents for me a kind of deified figure in a world that is ever increasingly slick and wanting to appear authentic.

Below me sitting is the small frame of Ting sifu or Master Ting. Buck-toothed, tiny, and wonderfully animated (probably on tea) his hands are guiding, stirring, and caressing the flat leaves of the green tea around an iron cast pan that is a meter across and angled at around a 45 degree angle towards our master's seated frame. His hands are a worker's hands but there is an almost seductive flow in the way they glide over and scoop up the leaves, and let them slip through his fingers.

When I ask when he knows when the roasting is done, he smiles and says, "My hands know when they are done".

Sun slices in upon the face of the old master and into his pan of flattened green leaves. The morning still carries a little of the evening air as we are early in the day and it serves to create a backdrop for the baking tea. We've made our way through tea fields already but they are small versions of my beloved tea trees back in Yunnan. What makes Long Jing special is the preparation. Roasts are soft, low heat affairs that heat rather than burn, and that infuse rather than scald. Three roastings will help create that tell-tale Long Jing

In the past the leaves would be heated on bamboo wattles, but now even our old master has moved on with the times, using a small machine that is stuffed into this already stuffed little space. The leaves are put into a stainless steel basin with a delicate series of arms, which gently heats and flattens the leaves, tossing them into the air before they are heated pressed and tossed once more. Then the vital roasting stage begins. For most small batch Long Jing before being roasted.

Our cups of the present master's tea do not take place in a tea shop, at a tea table or even in a cup of any sort. He himself puts some leaves into two small glasses and pours in water that has had exactly 12 minutes to rest after having boiled. This time brings the temperature down to what he calls "the right temperature". I love this little bit of imprecise precision in a world that is constantly seeking the perfect glib answer.

The sips lack the bite and all-consuming power of the teas I am familiar with but they do reflect perfectly the scents that I've been taking in so deeply in the last hours. Creamy smooth and ever so slight with the tang of green grass it is a refreshing infusion of subtle vegetal flavours and needs a palate that isn't sullied by breakfast or any food infusions.

It is however the process that I've seen and of course Master Ting that make this day special. Hours lie ahead of us and they will be hours of sipping, and bearing this in mind I try to ease off of too many sips here...those efforts are unsuccessful however. Master Ting seemed to know this before I though.



Leaves that will end up as Long Jing near Hangzhou in the village of Long Wu.

A top grade Long Jing with short (end leaves) flat shapes and as with many teas around the world, it is the Spring harvest that is most coveted.





The master at work. In his words "my hands know when the leaves are ready".



The precious hands that have for 50 years been creating stunning Long Jing teas.



I have a moment with an idol.