

Puerh and the Question of Time



The esteemed Mr. Gao at work frying his stunning leaves.

Loose leaf tea, long shipped in chests from the Middle Kingdom's southeast tea shores, within bags amidst the molded, damp, and often dire conditions of ships at sea travelled and changed on its way to the western ports. Tea, one of the most sensitive and odor-absorbing vegetal substances on the planet took in vapors, bacteria, rotting produce, dilapidated wood, and spices that had been stuffed adjacent to it upon the schooners. By the time it arrived, it was more often than not in an abridged, 'enhanced', and often completely derelict form of its original self. As with so much of nature's elements, the notion of time and age come into play.

Tea today in its loose form is still enhanced, perfumed, flavored, oxidized, and double roasted to either impart a flavor or nuance, or in worse cases have a tea's innate deficiencies or age covered or hidden. Loose leaf teas, whether they be Oolongs, greens, yellows, whites, or reds will all generally start to lose their potency within 16 months of being produced, so the notion of flavoring and 'ageing' come into play.

Add to the discussion formed and molded cakes and tea suddenly appears not so simple at all. Yunnan's prized big-leaf 'Assamica' leaf (known now as Puerh) seemed a tea made to benefit from age and transport in forms. Different in size (larger) and in chemistry, it is a tea perfect for transport. Puerh teas were often wrapped and formed into any number of cosmetic shapes. Bricks, cylinders, mythical beasts, balls, and even 'bird's nests' were shoved aboard mules, camels, horses, and yak, and ushered off.

The 'cake' or bing (as it is known in China) is not simply a randomly concocted disc of tea; certainly not if it is done by someone who wants a precious tea to age, or develop the way it should. Puerh, which is one of the first and certainly most common teas to have been deliberately shaped into forms is a tea that, rather than fade away into a flat, dusty, pile of tasteless-ness, will further develop and adopt other qualities as well as another frame of 'taste' reference. It will age. This is where Puerh glows in a kind of unique rapture. It's chemistry and production methods allow it to age, develop and further morph. Age is becoming an increasingly 'hot' topic in the tea community, and the question of "Does a tea become better with age?"

Here it is important in the Puerh vernacular to understand what age actually refers to. A tea can come from an aged or ancient tree, hundreds of years old. While this is referred to as 'Old Tree Tea', it isn't what people mean when referencing 'Old Tea'. Old tea refers to a tea that was produced (using any combination of leaves) long ago and allowed to age naturally, in time oxidizing from a green tea into a dark smooth tea. Again here, Puerh alone can claim this ability to age and develop rather than dissipate into a tasteless heap.

It has long been a source of entertainment, debate, and confusion whether an 'aged' tea is in fact 'better' (whatever that might mean in the very subjective world of anything consumable) when it is 'old' or not. Many in the world of tea will swear that they will never drink a Puerh that is under 20 years old, or some such nonsense. These claimants are usually those who live far from the source of growing the tea, and who take a kind of elite pleasure in the knowledge that they are partaking in something rare...if it in fact is 'aged' as they think it might be and is a standout tea.

On the inverse side of that philosophy many local indigenous who cultivate the precious Puerh leaves and drink heaps of the stuff will rubbish the notion that an aged tea has anything special to it besides the fact that it is...well, aged. They will claim that a Puerh reaches its sublime peak after about 14 months after being harvested and produced, allowing for a natural ageing. Within the Lahu, Dai, and Hani minorities many pickers will delight in drinking a newly harvested tea, plucked from ancient trees that seethes with a kind of raw power and vegetal punch.

Puerh comes in two forms: raw ('sheng' or green) which is picked, withered, fried, rolled, and dried to age on its own, or the 'ripe' ('shou' or 'black') which is created by layering leaves in a controlled setting with humidity, stirring, and sometimes a small addition of bacteria (the harmless variety). Makers of this latter tea sometimes refer to it as a 'false' tea, referring to the fact that it appears and has the attributes of an aged tea, without being such.

Myself, being someone who enjoys various teas, but most often those that pique something a little special (and sometimes unrepeatable) have often found marvelous examples of Puerhs that hit the tongue with something I often refer to as raw or 'unkempt'. These tend to be youngish teas that are raw or 'green' coming off of old trees.

I decided to get some simple thoughts on the increasingly important topical aspect of 'aged' Puerh from a cultivator and producer of superb Puerh tea, who not only grows it, but he consumes nothing but it. It should also be noted that his Puerh teas regularly sell out a year in advance, so predictable and stunningly good are his harvests.

Mr. Gao, a long-time mentor of mine and master of creating Puerhs from Banzhang in the Pulang (Bulang) mountains of southern Yunnan province. His ancient trees, tenacious commitment to quality over quantity, and a superb palate make him the perfect sounding board for anything Puerh-related. He is also, happily, one of the most unpretentious and 'real' tea people I've ever encountered.

His manner is that of someone who studies and observes before speaking rather than jumping to be heard. He is not prone to overstatement nor is he prone to rash remarks. He simply knows tea. Dark skin and kind eyes along with an immaculately kept little moustache mark his face and nothing in his being whatsoever appears rushed or hurried. He is someone content in his skin and knowledge and I have the faith in him and his straightforward words.

His home is tucked into a hollowed out mass of sub-tropic forest well over a thousand meters. It is a town with centuries of tea history. The Akha (Hani) people who reside here have done so, completely in tune with their lands, the environment and the beings that they share the earth with. They observe the vegetation's every move and use. Like so many indigenous, they have lived in a kind of gentle communion with their surroundings and understand its every breath.

It is no different with tea. Here the leaf is no less than everything. Medicine, economic powerhouse, sacred leaf...tea occupies discussions, thoughts, and daylight work hours to no end. Spring season is mayhem and people rarely sleep as the first and most sacred harvests are brought in. Summer and autumn are times to pluck and rest and wonder at the increases in prices per kilgoram that will come. Winters are times of waiting again for the Spring harvests. Every year, Mr. Gao's harvests sell

for some of the highest prices of any of the coveted Banzhang Puerhs, which translates for many into the best of all Puerhs.

Fast forward to the present where I sit in his newly constructed and very cluttered tea tasting room. He sits cross-legged massaging his left calf and giving some thought to my question about 'aged' tea. We are sipping some of his favorite, which incidentally, is not aged. It is a powerful summer harvest of last year that he prefers and that his 'buyers' don't quite covet. His spring teas are sold out months and sometimes a year in advance to Hunan and Guangdong businessmen who ensure that they are the first to get their bids in. But, this summer tea is one that he has a bit more of – though still not cheap – and one that he prefers.

Mr. Gao is casually aware that his economic fate rests with his leaves, but is comfortable knowing that continued hard work and consistency will ensure a comfortable future with tea. His premium spring flushes off of his most ancient teas are thousands of dollars a kilogram and in a good day he can produce 10 kilograms of his finest. This goes on for weeks on end.

My question is simple: "What does he think of the 'aged tea' trend"? Like with so much that he does, he is in no rush. He pours another tea from his gai wan into my contented cup.

"'Old tea' is something that I understand but do not drink. It is an outsider's idea of good tea. We do not drink it here but it has value. Many from far away used to come and search our attics with flashlights hoping to find a forgotten tea that our parents or grandparents would have hidden away. We used to give it away, but now we sell it but there is very little left".

He looks at me with those soft eyes, and asks, "And how would someone far away actually know if a tea is old or not"? The question is not asked assuming I'll answer.

"Puerh tea for us should be bitter and finish sweet, not taste sweet and finish sweet. Bitterness is not a bad thing for us. It is a necessary thing in a tea but I think you in the west get this idea mixed up". We've been sipping the very essence of this philosophy. It is a favorite of his that is a pungent new tea with an iron flavor that leaves the tongue at first coated and then tinged with sweet residue. It is not a trend, not a famed first spring harvest, but rather a tea that his esteemed palate finds interesting and full of quality.

Our discussion continues, "Aged tea loses much and is unpredictable in taste but people are obsessed with it", Mr. Gao continues. "It is also harder to actually determine whether or not it is a good tea. A good tea must have good raw materials, regardless of whether it is aged or not. A fresh tea cannot hide itself. It is simple to tell whether it is a good tea, produced well, or not. An 'old' tea isn't so simple to confirm".

At one point he spreads his arms out to encompass the room, his home, everything it seems. “Here I have no old tea at all, only fresh teas. You must also remember that an old tea needs good storage. Any impurities, flavors, or materials that carry an odor will impart the tea with it”.

Around Mr. Gao’s home in the valleys, the famed red soil, altitudes, slopes and legacy of great raw materials there is what every good tea needs: a great home. Tea is consumed in rampant amounts every single day and at all times of day.

Winding down yet another long tea drinking session in Banzhang with night sounds outside in full voice, Mr. Gao sums up what might be as perfect a statement regarding tea drinking preferences as I’ve heard.

“Some like aged teas, and some like new teas. What is important is to understand what makes a good tea good, and then let the mouth decide the rest”.

Smiling, Mr. Gao decides that we are not quite finished our nightly sips and he begins to prepare a final serving of tea...which just so happens to be how each and every evening draws to a close and how each day begins in this little haven of fresh vegetal Puerhs.





Some of the ancient tea trees in Banzhang that belong to Mr. Gao. It is tea from such trees that some of the most pricey Puerhs come from.



The seen in Banzhang played out at each and every home during the harvest season. Here a series of outdoor fryers are busy morning and night.