

A few thoughts on Pu-erh Tea

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Puerhshop.com

Folklore

In many Chinese tea literatures published, it was suggested tea was exposed in the rain and other conditions on the ancient tea horse road, so when it arrived in Beijing the Capital from remote mountains in Yunnan, it had been aged and fermented nicely. So the tea drunk by emperor and his imperial court was actually ripe, and it was simply tasteful and wonderful.

This is not true, simply folklore.

The processing technique of modern ripe pu-erh tea started in 1975 is called ‘Wudui’(渥堆), demands a lot of care. Here ‘wu’ (渥) means that tea is covered by blanket with moisture, and ‘dui’ (堆) is a big pile of tea. First of all, the amount of tea used for this process has to be a critical mass, say, at least over 1,000 kilograms. Secondly the temperature and humidity has to be closely watched, and controlled by spreading certain amount water over the pile, and turning over the pile every 3-5 day.

The ripe tea made from modern Wudui (artificial) processing cannot be re-produced by a natural ageing process via ancient tea horse road.

We believe the tribute tea to Qing imperial court had to be green or lightly fermented.



A modern Pu-erh tea fermentation shop

Vintage

The vintage has been a big deal in Pu-erh tea. People are willing to pay hundreds for an aged tea, but does it make sense?

Yes and No.

Yes if the tea is genuine good in terms of taste (not because of its age).

No, because not all aged teas are equal in terms of taste (even stored under the same condition).

The point is we stored our tea for a better taste. The key word should be ‘taste’, not age (vintage).

A vintage tea tasted different from its new counterpart, it may be good, but not necessarily better.

Dry stored vs wet stored

How a tea is stored to produce a tasteful (aged) tea?

It has been recognized by most people in Pu-erh tea circle: A wet stored tea would be fermented

more, thus smooth but lost some flavor, and a dry stored tea is sharp, and flavorful but rough.

A few years in a dry storage does not make a tea dead for further ageing, but a wet stored tea would never recover the flavor lost.

So, generally speaking, dry storage wins.

Storage Objective

Now the question: Can a raw/green Pu-erh tea (say, a green Pu-erh tea cake or brick you buy today) ever aged (say 20-30 years or longer) into a ripe Pu-erh tea like the one we made from Wudui?

The answer is never.

To wait a tea aged long enough to become a ripe tea is silly. Wudui is a better option.

So the best tea is really a tea that is in between. That is, a semi-aged tea. Let's push a bit further, the best tea is a lightly fermented tea.

My tea has thin layer of mold! Should I toss it?

It is a common statement that some foods have mold that is safe to eat and even delicious. For example, Brie cheese has surface mold. Other molds trigger allergic reactions and respiratory problems. A few molds produce mycotoxins, which are poisonous substances.

Pu-erh tea (*Camellia sinensis*), while grown and made without fungicides, it is more likely to contain mold and yeast spores, it is purposely made in such a way for ageing to improve its tasting profile.

It is scary to find the tea you have treasured so much has grown some spotted mold or even covered by a thin layer of mold.

As long as the mold you discovered is not in any other color but white, and you smell it, find it just like before, without emitting any unpleasant odor, it is likely your tea is in the fast lane of fermentation (the same as 'Wudui', the process for modern ripe Pu-erh).

What happened? Blame it on high humidity and low/no airflow at your storage..

Should I toss it out?

Mold contamination in tea is a new topic of research, and scientists have not yet performed many studies specifically on mold and yeast spores in tea, so conclusive information is lacking.

Some may argue that Puerh gone moldy is more like a brick of cheddar in the fridge that has been there too long and becomes bad. This is simply not the case. The commercial cheddar is pasteurized/sterilized before it is sold, so there is no active yeast/bacteria in it. Any mold found on the cheddar is foreign and it can be bad. In comparison, the counterpart in food should be a cup of Greek yogurt that is sold with active microscopic fungi (or mold), purposely done that way. That's right, yogurt is totally a bunch of living, breathing bacteria. You're not just eating something that's alive. You're eating entire cultures (and if it's Greek yogurt, you're eating a cultural variation on eating cultures). Even though Puerh is very unique, you can see the similarity.

Without living, breathing bugs, Pu-erh tea would not get aged, only oxidized.

Why some tea but not all of them has mold?

Simply put, an old tea tends to develop **visible** mold. While for others you cannot see the mold, but they are there, live and strive. The truth is that the pervasive nature of mold and yeast spores in Pu-erh makes it impossible for anyone to guarantee the complete absence of mold and yeast spores within the very fibers of the tea leaves.

Mold is one of the things responsible for pu-erhs maturation, it is believed that colorful mold on pu-erh is toxic, however, a light frosting of white mold is said to be beneficial.

Next time when you see the mold on the tea, your option is to brush them off, and brew the tea with boiling water. Or trash the tea if you are not comfortable to drink it, and forget about Pu-erh.