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First American Hao (MGH) 0801 Green Pu-erh Tea Cake
History in the making
What is Pu-erh Tea?

Pu-erh or Puer tea (Chinese: 普洱茶; pinyin: pǔ’ěrchá) is a fermented tea, named after Pu'er (used to call Simao) county in Yunnan, China. It is an unusual tea, because unlike other teas which are consumed shortly after production, it can be over 50 years old and is usually aged at least 1-4 years. Over this time it acquires an earthy flavour due to fermentation which in some cases may result in a layer of mold that develops on the leaves.

In Cantonese culture, pu-erh is known as po-lay, bo-lay tea, or bo-nay tea and is often drunk during dim sum meals with family and friends, as it is believed to help with digestion. Pu-erh is considered a medicinal tea in China before 2007.

The Pu-erh tea has been subject to a number of health studies. A number of medical studies have substantiated claims that the tea helps reduce cholesterol levels and saturated fats in human; it could also assist in weight loss.

History

Unlike other varieties of tea, Pu-erh tea is traditionally made with older leaves (not the first flush or bud/tip leaves) from tall and old trees. These trees are of a type only found in Yunnan province, known as broad leaf tea. The leaves are larger than other tea leaves, and have a different/higher chemical composition. The leaves are then left green or moderately fermented before being dried. Often times the tea is then compressed into cakes or bricks, wrapped in paper, and stored in a dark place that exposed to moisture, air, and heat in order to further mature. Then the tea is stored for several years before taking on the darker, mellower characteristics that make Pu'erh tea. This type of tea originated from the natural aging process that happened along the ancient caravan routes, and the tea bricks were at times used as a form of currency. The tea bricks developed a unique flavor that was then refined by aficionados. Legend has it, one of the most expensive and rare Pu'erh teas is made from the droppings of worms that eat stored Pu'erh teas.

Varieties

Many have mistakenly categorised Pu-erh as a sub class of black tea, due to its dark color. In fact, it is impossible to process Pu-erh from black tea. There are 2 major categories of Pu-erh:
Green (青饼 qīng bǐng) This tea, after drying under the sun, is left unadultered to age naturally. Though it takes longer to mature, it is considered superior by afficionados.

Cooked (熟饼 shú bǐng) This tea is manipulated to accelerate the aging process.

Preparation

Pu-erh, as with Chinese black teas, and especially Yunnan teas, is generally expected to be served Gong-Fu style, generally in Yixing teaware or a Gaiwan. The tea is often steeped for long periods of time and can acquire a dark brown/black color, as dark as strong coffee. Because of the prolonged fermentation and oxidization pu-erh often fails to develop the bitter, astringent properties of other teas, and can be brewed much stronger and for hours.

Above retrieved and modified from "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pu-erh_tea"
Pu-erh teas come from Yunnan province and improve with age. Some are still drinkable at age 50. They come in green/raw/sheng, and cooked/fermented/shu tea. These are teas with medicinal qualities, highly prized by the connoisseur. For cooked/fermented/shu tea, tea leaves are withered, then, still slightly moist, they're heaped into piles where a bacterium creates a reaction. The leaves are then dried loose or compressed into tea bricks or cakes.

The peoples of the Yunnan-Tibet border have drunk pu-erh since the Tang dynasty, according to a Song dynasty scientific reference. The troops of Kublai Khan, "pacifying" the southwest after the 13th century Mongol conquest, are said to have introduced pu-erh to the rest of China for its medicinal value. Bricks of pu-erh tea constituted the first medium of monetary exchange used by nomads beyond the Great Wall of China, recorded in Chinese records as early as A.D. 476.

The aroma and flavor are earthy. It is said to help lower blood cholesterol levels and increase metabolism.
Positive Effect of Yunnan Pu-erh Tea

Catechin (tannin)
Catechin, also called Tannin, is a bioflavonoid that has both antiviral and antioxidant qualities. It helps to prevent cancer by inhibiting the growth of cancer cells. Catechin also has many positive cholesterol-lowering effects. It helps to clear blocked veins and arteries, allowing your blood flow more smoothly. Some studies show that catechin may help prevent strokes, heart attacks, blood clots and even heart disease. Amazingly, catechin also protects the entire body from oxidative damage due to free radicals and other toxins in our environment.

Vitamin C
Vitamin C, Catechin, and Vitamin E work together to enhance immune function. These three nutrients also help to make your skin more beautiful by reducing blemishes, wrinkles and sun damage. Vitamin C found in tea is water-soluble, but its potency is not reduced by the heat used in brewing tea.

Amino Acid
Tea is the only plant that makes the amino acid Theanine. Theanine stimulates alpha-brainwaves which are associated with a relaxed but alert mental state. It helps relax the mind allowing one to focus on the task at hand. Catechin is bitter and Theanine is sweet. These two elements create a perfect balance of taste.

Caffeine
The mild caffeine in pu-erh tea has been found to increase cognitive performance, alertness, and energy. It can also help with weight loss through its stimulating and mild diuretic effects.

Flavonoids
The bioflavonoids found in tea help to keep your teeth and gums healthy. You can gargle with tea after brushing your teeth to kill germs and prevent bad breath.

Minerals
Tea is rich in minerals, including manganese, potassium and calcium, which help to alkalinize the blood, regulate the heartbeat, and build strong teeth and bones.
After teatime: tips of used tea leaves

Even after tea time, used tea leaves can benefit your daily life!

Deodorizer
Tea leaves have an amazing deodorizing effect. For example, you can burn dried used tea leaves as incense. The smoke will eliminate odors and make your room smell fresh. You can also put dried used tea leaves in your shoes to remove bad odors. Odors on cooking equipment like cutting boards and cooking pots can be removed by wiping them with damp used tea leaves.

Antirust
Wiping a steel pot or knife with used tea leaves can prevent the item from rusting. Tannin, an ingredient of pu-erh tea, makes an anti-rust coating on the surface of steel.

Antiseptic Effect
Tea leaves have an antiseptic and astringent effect. You can gargle with tea to kill germs or use as a topical antiseptic or astringent to keep your skin beautiful and healthy.

The southern part of Yunnan is a mountainous area, where the average altitude is about 2000 metres. "High mountain yields high quality tea", tea masters used to say. No industry, no pollution, far from big city, fertile soil, enough rainfall and sunshine.....all these make the Pu-erh tea a really natural tea. Many varieties of local tea exist; some of the best known names are Beeng(cake), Tuocha, and Brick Pu-erh teas. Yunnan black tea is very famous and excellent.

Yunnan Pu-erh tea is known as the world's most ancient tea, and world's finest tea. Studies shows that the Pu-erh tea is the ancestor of all teas existed today in the world and it is famous for its great taste, arising value and health benefits.
Scientific studies in France, China and Japan have proven that this tea has a lot of medical benefits to human being. It helps reduce body weight and lower cholesterol in the blood stream. Pu-erh is very popular in Japan, Korea and Europe where it is recognized as a diet aid.

Pu-erh tea was claimed to have many profoundly healthy properties such as:

- significant impact on controlling obesity as it helps metabolise fat
- influences aging process and improves longevity
- stimulates central nervous system (better concentration, less reaction time)
- helps to reduce cholesterol and cultivates blood circulation to protect your heart
- can be an anti-carcinogenic
- helps to maintain the overall balance of your body by removing body toxins and enhancing the immune system

33 Health Benefits of Drinking Tea
http://www.nursingdegree.net/blog/18/33-health-benefits-of-drinking-tea/
Pu-erh Tasting

Tasting Pu-erh has a lot of similarities as wine testing. It needs our senses to assess the quality and ensures the tea is in good condition. Normally, the first stage of tasting is looking at the brew and checking for clarity and color. General speaking, a good quality fresh green/raw Pu-erh supposed to be clear yellow or orange, and a ripe/black Pu-erh is from a range of dark red to black. An aged tea might be dark red but clear.

The sense of smell is an important part of tasting. Smell and taste are closed linked together. The palate can only be confirmed and detected by the nose. A good tea should smell appealing. Any hint of mustiness or bad nose will tell you the tea is faulty and should be rejected. A well storaged aged Pu-erh should have a complexity of nut, wood, even flowery aromas.

Nevertheless, you should pay attention to the balance among several basic sensations. One of the first sensation you might notice is the sweetness. You should ask yourself how this sweetness is balanced with acidity, which is most critical for all good Pu-erh. A good balance between sweetness and acidity will manifests itself as mouth-watering sensation. It gives freshness in the mouth. On the other hand the sensation of dryness or harshness on the teeth, gum or tongue not necessary mean bad. It is a typical property for all young green Pu-erh cause by the high concentration of Tea-Polyphenal but it's a vital preservative enables the tea to keep for decades. As the aged tea matures and the Tea-Polyphenol will break down and becomes more soften and balanced. This will also add to an extra dimension to layers of flavor and making the tea all more interesting.
How to prepare Pu-erh Tea?

Step 1: Pry 3-5g tea off the cake/brick/tuo with Pu-erh knife and add tea leaves to a Yixing teapot or a Gaiwan.

Step 2: Pour boiling water into the teapot, give the tea leaves a rinse for 5 - 10 seconds. Then draining the water out, leaving only the soaked tea leaves.

Step 3: Fill the teapot with boiling water again, cover the lid. After steeping 5-10 seconds (according to your desired strength), the tea can be poured into a tea pitcher to be served.

Step 4: repeat step 3 for 5 to 8 times. Gradually increase steeping time for subsequent brewing.

Water is so important

When brewing a tea, water is the most important element, after selecting a quality tea.

If you use the tap water and your tea would taste terrible in the most part of the world. The bottled water, either spring water or distilled water is much better. You could consider to buy a water filter to improve the quality of the tap water.

(For green teas, don't use boiling water or you would cook the tea. One way to do it is that firstly pull barely enough water to cover the tea leaves, let it cool down a bit. Once you are ready to drink, pull warm water to fill the cup and serve.)

Be sure to wash a Pu-erh tea before anything else. Use boiling water, but try different infusing time, from 5 sec. to 20 sec. to gain the best result.
How to store your pu-erh tea

To make sure that your pu-erh storage is appropriate for your tea, the most importants are as follows:

- Avoid direct sunlight, preferably in a dark place
- Avoid other fragrances than the one from the pu-erh tea
- Keep a humidity level of 60% to 85%
- Maintain a proper air flow
- Avoid high fluctuation of temperature

Humidity and pu-erh
A certain level of humidity is needed to allow the tea to ferment properly. There is no need to be afraid of humidity level as high as 85% as long as there is a proper airflow to dry the tea and allow some dry period with a level of humidity inferior to 60% or so.

Why keep the bamboo leaves on bundles of beeng cha?
The bamboo leaves will help to protect the tea from the humidity because when the weather gets a little bit humid, the fiber from the bamboo leaves expand thus blocking the humidity.

Storing cooked and raw pu-erh tea together?
It is possible to store cooked and raw pu-erh together in the same place. It is also possible to store them by mixing them together so that the teas benefits from each other’s fragrances. However, Purists will always prefer to store raw pu-erh away from cooked pu-erh even storing pu-erh tea from different factories separately so that the characters of the tea are not mixed.
Puer Tea Growing Regions

Xiaguan tea-growing region

This tea growing region includes Simao, Baoshan, and northern Lincang areas that covered Mengku, Changning, Yunnan, Jingdon, Jinggu, Mejiang, Zhenyuan, and other places. High altitude and high temperature with less rainfall, tea grown with fresh spring water tends to be of more fragrance, slightly bitter, yet with faintly acidic flavor.

Menghai tea-growing region

Menghai tea-growing region covers Xishuangbanna area, south of Lancang River (the name changed to Mekong River in Vietnam), including Jinghong, Bada, Bulang, Banzhang, Nannuo, Menglong, Mengsong, and Mengzhe areas. Lower altitude, but higher temperature with more rainfall, tea in this region features strong aroma, higher bitterness, and great fragrance.

Six Famous Tea Mountains

Throughout Yunnan's tea producing history there have been references to six famous mountains renowned for
producing the best tea in the region. Historically, the Six Famous Tea Mountains were located north of the Lincang River and were named after six items left behind by Zhugeliang, then Prime Minister of Shu in the Three Kingdoms period. According to legend, Zhugeliang taught the people of southern Yunnan the art of harvesting and making tea. The names of these historic mountains were Youle (copper gong), Mangzhi (copper boa), Manzhuan (iron brick), Yi Bang (wooden clapper), Gedeng (leather stirrup), and Mansa (seed-sowing bag).

For various reasons, the names and locations of these six mountains shifted gradually through time. Perhaps the same name was used by different groups for different mountains. Some confusion may have resulted from the fact that the names recorded were Chinese translations or phonetic approximations of native languages used in the area.

We do know that of the mountains considered to be the famous Six by the mid-twentieth century, many had fallen into extreme disrepair due to large fires, over-picking, or neglect. As a result, in 1962 a new group of Famous Six Tea Mountains were named based on the best tea producing mountains at the time - Yiwu, Jingmai, Menghai, Nannuo, Bulang, and Youle. All of these mountains had been famous for many years, one of which, Youle, was a member of the original Six.

Throughout the years, another Famous Six were designated from south of the Lincang River and include some of the mountains from the 1962 list. These are Mengsong, Nannuo, Menghai, Bada, Nanqiao, and Jingmai.

Of course, southern Yunnan is full of tea and mountains and there are several others that, though not included in the Six, are renowned in and of themselves for their tea forests. Banzhang, Bangwei, and Ailao are three such mountains whose teas are as distinct and flavorful as any of the Six, yet are not as well known.
Good Puer Tea is made in a small factory

Large tea factories (like Dayi, Xiaguan, Haiwan, and Mengku) do make good products, but they would be hard-pressed to make excellent products.

You may ask why.

First of all, they have to produce a large volume to meet the market demand. Different grade raw tea leaves from different tea growing regions are mixed. They could not afford to follow the traditional tea production process. For example, fresh tea leaves are not sun dried, but baked dry in a machine, which most likely has a negative effect on the quality of the tea made. Big manufacturers can afford a high marketing budget to boost their product sales.

For example, there is no doubt that Banzhang mountain is always the Pu-erh favorite. However, the vast amount of so-called Banzhang Pu-erh on the market raised a question about their authenticity. According to local people, annual productions of Banzhang tea leaves are only about 6,000 to 8,000 kg. This means that at 400g each, only 15,000 to 20,000 cakes can be made of real Banzhang leaves. The major characteristic of Banzhang Pu-erh is its strength. Banzhang Pu-erh is the strongest among those popular tea mountains. Unless you know what you are doing, maybe this is not something you would buy anywhere but from an authentic source?

It’s a fact that some small tea factories make excellent teas.

Excellent raw tea leaves are usually available in small quantity; they are supposed to be picked from these old wild trees in 6 famous tea mountains. The naturally organic tea leaves are plucked, panned and kneaded, and then sun-dried in an open field, a process adopted hundreds years ago. Small tea factories are always shy from big marketing hype because of their limited budget, so they are less known to average tea drinkers.

On the other hand, some small fly by night tea factories do make some questionable products so you have to watch out.
Pu-erh Tea Recipes

This is supposed to be the top secret. Something like 'I can tell you, but I have to kill you'.

Remember that the grade 1 is the best, while the grade 10 is the worst in grading tea leaves, based upon Chinese system.

1. Xiaguan Tibetan Flame Brick

30% Grade 9-10 Sun-dried macocha, 3% Green Tea (baked dried), the rest, stems and other tea leaves cannot be sold because they were so poor in appearance.

Receiving end: Poor Tibetan people
Shocking! It seems that the recipe was made to go as cheap as possible, but it is true.

2. Menghai 8582 Tea Cake

8% grade 5-8, 20% grade 7-8, 44% grade 9-10, the rest, stems and other tea leaves cannot be sold, 26%.

Receiving end: Hongkong
The higher grade (5-8) leaves were used to cover the surface of the cake so as to make it look pretty, But it still looks like someone wanted to dump a bunch of unwanted stuff!

Back in old days, green tea and black tea were bread and butter for a tea factory. In order to avoid the unwanted to go the wasted land, they invented the recipes. The purpose is to sell them off at the lowest price possible to whomever.

But one thing hold up for these recipes to work in the days to come, the tea leaves were mostly harvested from Ancient Tea Trees.
Buy a Pu-erh tea for aging

It is a topic in which most Pu-erh tea lovers would be interested.

The successfully aged Pu-erh teas are mostly expensive, and highly desirable. If only we know how to pick a few gems in the rough, when a young Pu-erh tea is still inexpensive and affordable. It would be a dream to come true.

The aging process involved two aspects: oxidation and fermentation. The oxidation process is responsible for the conversion of a few elements - mostly chemically, as one thing we could observe, the color of the soup. The fermentation takes place with proper temperature and humidity, here a few good bacterias can be your best friends - the real taste amplifier for a Pu-erh tea.

The common sense is that a young green Pu-erh should taste strong, flavorful with a lots of 'stuff/ohms/substances', we then could predict it got a bright future when it gets aged, because it supports a better fermentation. So when we are buying a young Pu-erh, we demand these with most strong feel, endurable to brew.

This may not be true according to a few Pu-erh tea experts. A great tasting/strong young Pu-erh tea may grow into something dull, non-interesting when it ages for a few years or longer, tea experts warned. The color of the soup may change into pretty red due to the oxidation, the strong taste may disappear, the bitterness might be gone, but the aged tea is, simply a subdued colored water in the end.

How could that be possible?

Nobody has a crystal ball when it comes to decide if a tea has great aging potential, the storage condition aside.

Apparently, someone does have a better understanding on the matter, especially some Hongkong tea merchants who bought tons of teas every year. For example, 2006 Changtai 339 Pu-erh Tea Cake can hardly be called a great tea when you drink it young. One thing we could not stand it is its smokeness. Yet, this tea cake is considered as one of the best aging candidates. It would age marvelously well in Hongkong.
For a person who lived in Indianapolis, this brick 2007 Premium Mengku Arbor Pu-erh Tea Brick (or in cake form 2007 Mengku Arbor Pu-erh Tea Cake) has performed quite well, it is not a super star, but it does change along the years.

Everyone knows that standard Dayi 7542/7532/8582 and a few other Menghai recipes would age handsomely.

Well, this still not answered our question: how do you pick a good tea that would age well into the future?

It's time for us to reveal the secret.

Simply put, different people have different winning strategies.

First, for a person who buys directly from tea farmer, he should have monitored the whole tea making process from picking to the finished product. Here is a short list to watch:

- Not real Yunnan Daye (big leaf) raw material is used
- 'Kill green' is done too late after it's plucked
- 'Kill green' is paned improperly with too much heat or low heat
- The leaves are kneaded too hard or too light
- so on and so forth ...

Many shortcuts or abnormal processing methods might be applied during the tea manufacturing process. The traditional tea production process is not followed. For example, fresh tea leaves are not sun dried, but baked dry in a machine, which most likely has a negative effect on the quality of the tea made and its aging potential.

It has been proven that it's an essential step to steam the maocha for aging, even you are not going to compress it into a brick/tuocha/cake - a maocha would become better aged in a few years if you steam it before placing it into the storage.

Now for us, the regular tea drinkers whom only buy the finished products, what we could do to pick a winner?

The answer is simple: go for the proven.

This means to go for the proved formula tea like Menghai Dayi 7542/8582 for plantation blend teas. For premium/big(ancient) tree/qiaomu teas, buy it semi-aged, you may start it by buying a sample, say 5 years old that has showed significant changes.

Here you are, the plain truth.

We rushed to a conclusion a bit earlier than we should. A few points need to be explained.

A strong, bitter, and astringent tea is better for aging? Not so fast.
A 'baked' plantation tea from Menghai most likely has all characteristics mentioned above, it smells great, very strong in taste. The problem is that it's a 'GREEN' tea made in a wrong way as a Pu-erh. A big tree tea made by the traditional method from the same area would taste 'weak', grassy, and not so strong. Most would jump to a conclusion that the plantation tea has a better aging potential since it tasted so good and strong.

Now if you compare a Menghai tea with a Yiwu tea, you would be confused even more. Yiwu big tree tea is so mild, it's no match to a Menghai tea. You would easily decide Yiwu tea is no good for aging.

The good news is that the tea processing has been improved/re-discovered since 2007 after the Pu-erh tea market melt down. People started to pay attention to the traditional tea making techniques. Tea making machines are good in large scale production for main stream products, but for most premium teas, you better do it manually.

Gook luck in your tea hunting.