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# TEA AND WINE

## DISPERSING A LIFETIME'S TROUBLES

by Andrew Jefford

*The first bowl sleekly moistened throat and lips;  
The second banished all my loneliness;  
The third expelled the dullness from my mind,  
Sharpening inspiration gained from all the books I've read.  
The fourth brought forth light perspiration,*

*Dispensing a lifetime's troubles through my pores.  
The fifth bowl cleansed ev'ry atom of my being.  
The sixth has made me kin to the Immortals.  
The seventh is the utmost I can drink—  
A light breeze issues from my armpits.*

Lu T'ung (d.835)

Water is humankind's favorite drink, and the universal drink of the animal world. This is hardly a surprise, living as we do on the blue planet, tracing our ancestry to sea life, and being composed chiefly of water ourselves. Tea comes next. There are no geographical and few cultural bars to its consumption; Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, agnostics, and atheists happily sip tea together (only Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons spurn the offer). Tea is much more widely drunk than wine, not least because of Islam's proscription of alcohol. In Britain, 40 percent of the human daily fluid intake is tea.

Both tea and wine are drug-laced water: Tea contains the world's most popular drug, caffeine, while wine contains the third most popular, alcohol. (Nicotine for the time being divides the two.) Caffeine is far more toxic than alcohol: 5g (0.176oz) would kill you, whereas anyone who drinks half a bottle of 12% ABV wine for dinner will have consumed 36g (1.269oz) of alcohol. The average cup of tea contains just 30mg (0.0106oz) of caffeine, though, and the average cup of coffee 75mg (0.0026oz). Weight for weight, tea leaves actually contain more caffeine than coffee beans, but fewer are used in the drink's preparation. The effects of small doses of caffeine (an increase in metabolic rate and neural activity) are less evident to both users and observers than the effects of larger doses of alcohol, which are too well known to bear repetition here.

Both tea and wine, thus, are old friends to man. They punctuate our days and nights; they bring us refreshment and solace. Personally, I would find it hard to live without either, and if I had to choose between the two, I would choose tea. This essay is in part a justification of that decision: the case for tea, made to wine drinkers by a wine drinker.

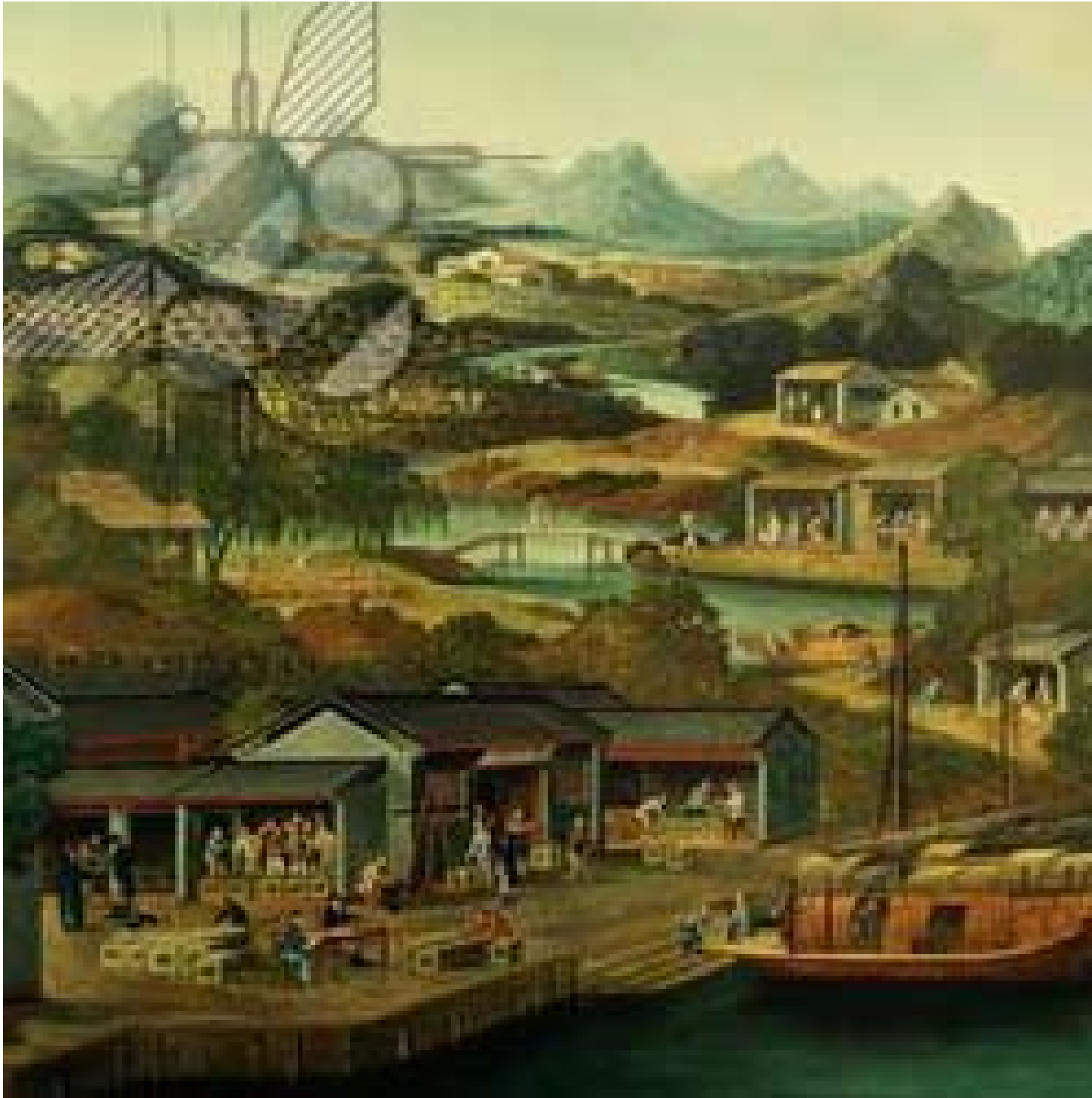
### Histories

The pair are Asian. Wine's origins lie in Transcaucasia, where wild *Vitis vinifera* vines grow abundantly. Tea's origins are Chinese. In southern China and northern Myanmar, wild

*Camellia sinensis* plants continue to thrive in the remote terrain (one third of China's territory is mountain). It is easy enough to create a rough tea garden by simply clearing away other plants and leaving the tea bushes to flourish. *Vitis vinifera* needs extensive selection and breeding (as well as grafting on to American-vine rootstocks) to be usefully fruitful; not so *Camellia sinensis*. Even today, the finest pu-erh teas in Yunnan province are made from wild tea trees, many of them hundreds of years old. In 1961, a tea tree over 98ft (30m) high with a trunk girth of some 3ft (1m) was found in Yunnan and thought to be more than 1,700 years old.

Plants this important to humanity, of course, need the sustenance of myth. No sooner had Noah stepped from his ark "upon the mountains of Ararat" than he "began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard." The exact means by which lofty, rampant wild vines were disciplined into the fruitfulness swiftly enjoyed by Noah ("And he drank of the wine, and was drunken") will never be known, but traces of wine have been found in a Neolithic jar from Hajji Firuz Tepe, a 7,000-year-old archeological site in Iran's Zagros Mountains, so viticulture was underway by then. Wine, it would thus seem, is senior to tea. Even the mythical origins of tea stretch back a mere 4,700 years to the legendary Emperor Shennong ("The Divine Farmer"), who sagely noted that boiled water was safer than lake or river water to drink. One day his servants allowed a few leaves to fall from a tea bush into the Imperial Kettle. The Emperor hazarded a sip or two of the infusion: delicious. A myth of greater graphic enchantment has Bodhidharma, the Buddhist monk who brought Chán (Zen) Buddhism to China in the 6th century, cut off his own eyelids to avoid falling asleep during meditation. The eyelids rooted; tea bushes grew from the sleepy flesh.

The first tentative written reference to tea occurs in the earliest collection of Chinese poetry, the *Shi Jing*, or *Book of Songs*, which dates from the 5th century BC; tentative, because



the ancient ideogram thought to signify tea might also designate other plants. Even if accurate, this would postdate, by several centuries, the sophisticated Greek winemaking cultures implied by the many references to wine in Homer's *Odyssey*. Most start the tea clock with the *Chá Jīng*, the Tang Dynasty masterpiece known as the *Tea Classic*, written by former circus clown Lu Yu between 760 and 780. Lu Yu was a kind of Chinese Columella whose work included horticultural and manufacturing instructions, from which we can deduce that systematic tea cultivation and consumption were already well established and probably had been since the Three Kingdoms epoch (222–263).

After Lu Yu's great book, more than eight centuries followed during which tea was principally a Chinese product (shared with Korea and Japan), and its cultivation and consumption became a matter of astonishing refinement. A substantial library of "Tea Classics" was created during the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1358–1644) Dynasties, of which perhaps the best known is the *Dà Guān Chá Lùn* or *Treatise on Tea* written by the Song Dynasty emperor Huizong in 1107. Huizong was an aesthete and polymath who painted, wrote poetry, and played the *guqin*; he invented the style of calligraphy known as "Slender Gold." He also neglected the army, leading to invasion,



George Chinnery (1774–1852), *Tea Trade in China*, watercolor on paper.  
Chinnery's scene shows a trading port harbor where tea chests await loading

auctioned in Amsterdam in 1608; 50 years later, it became a trader's treat in London. "That excellent and by all Physicians approved drink called by the Chineans Tcha, by other nations Tay alias Tea," boasted proprietor Thomas Garway in 1658, "is sold at the Sultanness Head a cophee house in Sweetings Rents by the Royal Exchange London." The civil servant Samuel Pepys drank his first cup two years later, in September 1660: "I did send for a cup of tea (a China drink) of which I had never drank before." That was three years earlier than the diarist's celebrated first taste of "Ho Bryan," and six years before Arnaud de Pontac sent his son François-Auguste to open London's first gastropub, the "Pontack's Head." Tea and fine claret, in other words, reached London simultaneously.

The tea trade continued to be Chinese-dominated for another century and a half. The Honourable East India Company maintained a monopoly on it which lasted until the 1830s, when the fact that the Company was dishonorably paying for the tea with profits from opium smuggling brought about, in part, the demise of the arrangement; the monopoly was beginning to grate with rival British merchants, too, and Parliament voted it down. The race was soon on to obtain seeds and plants from within Fortress China and plant them elsewhere—at which point it was discovered that tea was also indigenous to Upper Assam, "within the Honourable Company's Territories." (These indigenous plants may not have been true wild trees but were perhaps descendants of ancient tribal plantings.)

The progress of tea-growing outside China and its nearest neighbors was initially fitful. Eventually, however, India overtook China, and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) and Kenya became major producers, with scores of other countries producing smaller amounts of tea. More than 3 million tonnes are now produced every year. India and China both produce about 800,000 tonnes; Kenya 330,000 tonnes, and Sri Lanka 310,000 tonnes. *Camellia sinensis* is, in principle, a subtropical plant (China's wine is produced farther north than its tea), but the plant is hardy and anywhere where a hot summer combines with ample rainfall and regular cloud cover offers the potential for tea cultivation. The long days of dry, sunny heat so enjoyed by *Vitis vinifera* are inappropriate for a plant whose crop is leaf rather than fruit.

Historically speaking, two technological innovations have marched hand in hand with the geographical expansion of tea-growing. The first was the sales initiative of a New York tea merchant called Thomas Sullivan in 1908, who decided to send out samples of his teas to customers in small silk bags. The second took place at Amgoorie tea estate in Assam in 1931, when Sir William McKercher and his assistant FG Johnson created what they called a CTC ("crushing, tearing, curling") machine. The tea bag and the CTC machine have, between them, sired a tea market that values convenience above aroma and flavor, strength above delicacy, and cheapness above quality. It is as if the world wine market was almost wholly dominated by table wine. In the process, tea drinkers around the world have grown unfamiliar with China's extraordinary richness of tea types. It is as if wine drinkers had no idea that France existed.

collapse, and the eventual demise of the Song Dynasty. Having led a life of luxury and sophistication unrivaled anywhere else in the world at that time, Huizong was eventually reduced to the rank of a commoner and died, a captive, in Manchuria. His *Treatise* included material on what we could properly call tea terroir (places of origin and climates) and tea processing, as well as laying down criteria for tea competitions involving a form of blind tasting, and describing the Song form of the tea ceremony in great detail.

The first European reference to tea occurs in Ramusio's *Navigazioni e Viaggi*, published in Venice in 1559. Tea was

Packages of pu-erh tea. Like fine wine, the greatest cakes of pu-erh can be aged for many years. The square block of pu-erh here is 40 years old

## Cultures

All tea is made from the *Camellia sinensis* plant, and the striking differences between teas are due to variety, cultivar, exact harvesting date, and processing method. Most teas exist in a wide spectrum of “grades,” too—from the very finest whole leaf examples, via broken grades, to what are known as fannings and dust.

*Camellia sinensis* v. *sinensis* and *Camellia sinensis* v. *assamica* are the two fundamental varieties of the tea plant. The stronger, maltier v. *assamica* is used in Assam and in part in Sri Lanka and Kenya; the more delicate v. *sinensis* predominates in China, as well as being used in Darjeeling. The little-cultivated *Camellia sinensis* v. *waldenae* and the Cambodian *Camellia sinensis* v. *parvifolia*, thought to be a hybrid of *sinensis* and *assamica*, are other varieties.

Within these varieties, many different cultivars exist, and it is these cultivars that are the true equivalent of what the wine world calls grape varieties. Just as different wine appellations in France may share the same grape variety, so different tea types in China are based on certain common cultivars. Casually, China claims “10,000” tea types; there are certainly many hundreds in commercial production. (A contemporary Chinese *Book of Famous Green Teas* lists 135 types within this style alone.) Little of the Chinese literature concerning cultivars has yet been translated.

The tea types themselves fall into seven styles, and a grasp of these different styles is the simplest route to understanding Chinese tea. These styles are, in increasing order of strength of flavor, white tea, yellow tea, green tea, oolong tea, black tea and pu-erh tea. Teas infused with flower blossoms (usually based on green tea) constitute a further tea type, often called scented tea.

White tea (*bai cha*) is the easiest of all teas to make: It simply consists of sun-dried or warm-air-dried leaf. The leaf is processed, in other words, without undergoing any firing, steaming, bruising, or oxidizing. The most celebrated of all white teas is the light, feathery Silver Needle (Yin Zhen) produced in the Fuding area of Fujian Province: This is based on the Da Bai or Da Hao cultivars, picked in earliest spring (before the sap has risen) as downy buds alone. Any tea in the world, though, can be processed in a “white” style if wished.

Green tea (*lu cha*) is a vast family of teas based on a number of different cultivars—two celebrated examples would be the Long Jing 43 or Jiu Ken cultivars used to produce Dragon Well (Long Jing) tea. The leaves are picked at various points in the spring, with the most prized qualities being those picked before the Qing Ming spring festival. The picked leaves are withered for a few hours to allow the cell walls to weaken so that the moisture in the leaf can evaporate smoothly during the firing process. For the finest China green teas, the leaf is then fired in a dry, hot wok, by hand: The tea worker swirls and lifts the leaves to keep them moving and ensure they don’t burn. Chinese green teas of different types look notably different from one another, and much of the skill in firing consists of shaping the leaves in an appropriate way to the tea style. (Pellets



of green tea are known as gunpowder in English, or as “pearl tea,” *zhu cha*, in Mandarin.) Green tea can also be kiln-fired, and Japanese green teas are fired by steaming. After firing, the tea is rolled, and a final drying period (over charcoal for the finest and rarest green teas) concludes the process. Great green tea is, quite literally, “garden fresh”: The weighty, vividly green leaves seem to smell of chlorophyll, and the flavor is as excitingly verdant as any Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. The dusty, straw-like “green tea” sold in most tea bags, by contrast, is derisory; a vast quality gulf divides the two.

Yellow tea (*huang cha*) is picked in spring and initially wok-fired in the same way as green tea. The aim with yellow



tea, though, is to produce a tea with less of the grassy, chlorophyll flavors that characterize green tea. After this initial firing, the tea is then slow-dried at a very low temperature (traditionally having been first wrapped in yellow “cow-skin paper,” or *niu pi zhi*). This process pales the naturally green tea, and the end result is a wan, silvery green with a smoother and less grassy flavor than classic green tea. Yellow tea is becoming increasingly rare, even in China, because green tea made from the same sources is easier to market.

Oolong, black, and pu-erh teas differ from green tea in that they all undergo some element of oxidation during their processing; this is why the pristine green color is lost. This

oxidation is sometimes called “fermentation”—though, in contrast to wine, the transformation is accomplished by chemical and not biological means. No yeast is involved.

Oolong tea (*wulong cha*) is semi-oxidized. After picking, the leaves are withered as they are for green tea, though in this case they are tossed intermittently during the withering process. They are then placed in a drum and rotated to bruise the leaf and begin the oxidation process. Once a sufficient level of oxidation has been achieved (which varies greatly according to the type of tea produced), the leaves are then “stir-fired” in a horizontal spinning drum. Tightly rolled varieties are twisted in muslin before being refired and rerolled; they are finally



Tea leaves being harvested in Hangzhou, China, long renowned for the quality of its tea

Photography by Yang Liu / Corbis

oven-baked. Open-leaf varieties (such as oolongs from Wuyi or Baozhong from Taiwan) are machine-rolled and stir-fired in the spinning drum before being baked. Some oolong teas are almost green, while others are dark brown or ash gray; some, as indicated above, are relatively tightly rolled, while others resemble long, dry, crinkly tongues or spears of leaf. No tea type, though, is capable of greater aromatic refinement than this one. Great oolong tea is easily crushed, and needs very careful packing (as do fine green teas).

Black tea (*hong cha*, which actually means “red tea” in Chinese) is fully oxidized. After picking and withering, the leaves are bruised to the required degree by machines that roll the leaf to and fro. Once the oxidation is complete, the leaves are kiln-fired. There is a wide variation in black-tea types within China, from the finest, needle-like “hair tip” Keemun Maofeng, to coarse, low-grade black tea.

Pu-erh tea (*puerh cha*, or “dark tea”) is the only tea type whose processing involves maturation, analogous to the *élevage* of fine wine. Like fine wine, too, the greatest cakes of pu-erh can be aged for many years after sale, and 50- or 60-year-old examples command a high price (though there is little of the vintage differentiation that is such a hallmark of wine production). Authentic pu-erh is grown exclusively in Yunnan province and often picked from wild trees. (Cheap “pu-erh,” by contrast, is produced in Fujian, as well as Vietnam and Laos, from cultivated bushes.) The fundamental cultivar used is called Da Yeh (or “big leaf”), though it exists in many local and clonal variants in the province. After withering in the open air or in a well-ventilated space, the classical process of making pu-erh involves wok-firing followed by sun-drying of the leaf. At this point, the strands look almost like rough-rolled pipe-tobacco leaf. The leaves may then be immediately steamed and pressed into cakes, or they may be aged loose for a while before being steamed and pressed into cakes. Loose pu-erh ages relatively swiftly; compressed cakes of pu-erh age slowly. In youth, the tea has a pungent, powerful, and assertive flavor; with age, it grows darker, richer, more harmonious, and more profound.

There is an alternative, speedier way of making pu-erh that involves storing the leaves in very warm, humid rooms for 20 to 40 days before the drying process. This type of pu-erh is known as “cooked” or “ripened,” to differentiate it from the “raw” pu-erh of the classical method (a wine analogy here would be the difference between Madeira aged by *estufagem* and Madeira aged by *canteiro*). Some secrecy accompanies the making of cooked pu-erh. It’s less expensive than raw pu-erh and has less long-term aging potential, though it attains the classical rich, dark liquorousness associated with pu-erh relatively quickly.

Flower teas (*hua cha*), finally, are made by an elaborate process of layering green or black tea with the blossoms themselves. The petals or flowerheads (jasmine, rose, or osmanthus) infuse the tea with their scent and are later removed and discarded save for a few cosmetic strays. Essences are never used for high-quality flower tea. China has also developed an extraordinary art, a kind of vegetable origami, involving the creation of tea and flower blooms tied into the

shapes of flowers themselves, of animals or of other shapes, such as stars. One of these dried-flower tea shapes is placed in a glass teapot or vessel, where it unfolds in the hot water, often making an entirely new shape as it does so. The effect is like watching a slow underwater firework.

How does China tea production relate to that of the rest of the world? Green tea is dominant in China and Japan, whereas in almost all other producing countries, black tea dominates. Whole leaf black-tea production, as described above, is called “orthodox” in opposition to tea processed by CTC machines, which delivers a chopped, granular leaf. Orthodox black tea from all sources is customarily divided into 18 different grades: five whole-leaf grades, of which the best was TGFOP (Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe); six broken grades; four grades of fannings; and three of dust. CTC teas, by contrast, are graded into a mere two broken: two fannings and three dusts.

CTC versions and orthodox fannings and dusts, by contrast, tend to dominate exports. The culprit is the tea bag. Almost all tea bags are filled with CTC tea or fannings and dusts more generally: ideal for cheapness and strength, but miserably inadequate for subtlety and quality.

## Health

Tea is healthful. Indeed some studies suggest that tea is a healthier drink than water, especially for those whose diet is low in fresh fruit and vegetables. All tea brings health benefits, but green tea appears to be the most beneficial type of all. Adding milk (and sugar) to tea mitigates those benefits by inhibiting antioxidant absorption. Tea contains a number of useful compounds including fluoride, zinc, folic acid, manganese, and vitamins B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, and B<sub>6</sub>, but the principal “active ingredient” as far as its health benefits are concerned is the one it shares with red wine: tannin. “Tannin” is perhaps best described as a family of compounds whose chemistry is close to that of gallic acid (GA); tannins are commonly measured as if they were gallic acid or GA-equivalent. These compounds occur naturally in the bark of trees, especially oak; they help protect the tree from fire, insects, and bacteria. Those trained in the indelicate task of tanning animal skins (which, once the putrefying flesh had been excised, originally required human urine to help remove hair fibers and animal feces mixed with water to soften the skin) use wood tannins to convert the skin into leather. The tannins do this by interacting with the proteins in the skin. The same process is at work when you eat food with red wine, or add milk to black tea. Tannins, in fact, are common in the plant world: As well as tea leaves and grape skins, most berries contain them, as do persimmons and pomegranates. Wine tannins are usually called proanthocyanidins; tea tannins are called catechins. Both are classified as flavonoids and have antioxidant and other effects in the body that, many studies suggest, can help prevent cancer, heart disease, bowel disease, and neurodegenerative diseases.

## Philosophies

The philosophical flavor of tea is very different to that of wine, though the philosophical quest of the drinker is not dissimilar and the aesthetic dimensions of each drink have much in

## TASTES

Descriptions of China tea for those who have never experienced them can be bewildering, like details of how to find places in a town you have never visited. What I've tried to do in the section that follows is give a simple, wine taster's impression of some of the teas that I have most enjoyed, putting the emphasis on the differences between them.

### Silver Needle (*Yin Zhen*)

Type: White tea; Cultivar: Da Bai; Region: Fuding; Province: Fujian  
Light, feathery leaf tip covered in fine down. Very delicately scented, with notes of melon and peach. Soft, quenching flavors hinting at cucumber and melon; barely recognizable as "tea" at all.

### Hangzhou Dragon Well (*Long Jing*)

Type: Green tea; Cultivar: Long Jing 43; Region: Hangzhou; Province: Zhejiang  
Weighty, pressed, flat, green spears of leaf. Enticingly sappy, fresh scents of sweet chlorophyll with a creamy, hazelnut edge. Vivid, rounded flavors, combining grassy vivacity with white-nut richness.

### Huo Mountain Yellow (*Huo Shan Huang Ya*)

Type: Yellow tea; Cultivar: Jiu Ken; Region: Huo Mountain; Province: Anhui  
Silvered yellow-olive buds, many with marked downiness. Harmonious, almost hoppy scents. Vivid, fresh, perfumed flavors, combining an understated hoppy freshness with something delicately floral (violets, peach blossom). Creamy mid-palate textures. Discreet sappiness to finish.

### Phoenix Honey Orchid (*Feng Huang Dang Cong*)

Type: Oolong tea; Cultivar: Dan Cong; Region: Phoenix Mountain; Province: Guangdong  
Crisp, twisted spears of golden brown-black leaf. Almost improbably fragrant notes of peach and peach blossom, with some grapefruit pith and an overall honeyed sweetness, too. Light-bodied and incisive, with a refreshingly bitter-edged aftertaste.

### Iron Goddess of Mercy (*Tieguanyin*)

Type: Oolong tea; Cultivar: Tieguaanyin; Region: Anxi County; Province: Fujian  
Curled rolls of dark green-black, large leaf. Almost soapy, wet-stone aromas, followed by richly mineral flavors with grass and hay notes.

### Great Red Robe (*Da Hong Pao*)

Type: Oolong tea; Cultivar: Da Hong Pao; Region: Wuyi Mountain; Province: Fujian  
Long, crisp twists of dark brown leaf. Musky, mellow, softly fruity aromas with an earthy, autumnal note. Intense, pure, and complex, with great width of flavor.

### Keemun Hair Peak (*Keemun Mao Feng*)

Type: Black tea; Cultivar: Qi Men Zhong; Region: Qi Men County; Province: Anhui  
Crisp, dark, seaweed-fine curls. Scents of orris root and plant extracts. Vivid, deep flavor full of balanced freshness; earthy, savory base notes.

### Bohea Lapsang Supreme (*Wuyi Bohea*)

Type: Black tea; Cultivar: Bohea (Xiao Zong); Region: Wuyi Mountain; Province: Fujian  
Dark, thick twists of crow-black leaf. Rich, complex aromas with a log-cabin warmth and a chocolate edge. Lively yet soft-textured and full, with smoke, grain, and spice warmth and a sweet, fresh-flavored finish.

### 1998 Cooked Pu-Erh Mini Tuo, Menghai Factory (*Meng Hai Pu-Erh*)

Type: Pu-erh tea; Cultivar: Da Yeh; Region: Meng Hai; Province: Yunnan  
Small compressed dome of leaf with concave hole in base, wrapped in Menghai stamped tissue. A combination of dark brown and black leaf strands. Invasive, powerful, and characterful aromas: forcefully earthy scents with a smoky edge. Damp wood, autumn undergrowth, timber yard, and bonfire, plus a touch of fur and calfskin. After the power and attack of the aromas, and given the depth of color of the liquor, the gentleness and softness of the flavors come as a surprise. Mouth-filling, deep, and comforting, this pu-erh provides a rich, nourishing introduction to the taste of the Yunnan tea forests.

### 2000 Wild Raw Pu-Erh, Yi Wu Mountain (*Yi Wu Pu-Erh*)

Type: Pu-erh tea; Cultivar: Da Yeh; Region: Yi Wu; Province: Yunnan  
Neatly, evenly compressed cake with the rich color divergence typical of raw pu-erh: deep copper, walnut, humus, and ebony strands, evenly mixed. Light, elegant, fragrant, almost nutty aromas, with the complexity of mixed-leaf woodland in summer. Thick, glycerous textures with flavors that hint at fern, dried orange peels, and gentian root.

common. Wine, because of its alcoholic backbone, is elevating and stimulating, breaking down inhibitions and conveying to irredeemably separate beings the sense that they are not separate at all. Conversation, song, physical interaction, tribal sharing, the partaking of the divine common to both the Dionysiac mysteries and the Christian eucharist: All conspire to efface the pain of imprisonment within the ego.

Tea also provides an escape from the ego, though it does this by very different means. There is no alcohol; instead, there is only the scent and flavor of leaf, plant, and earth, accompanied by a mild charge of caffeine and the reassurance of warm liquid nourishment. The effect is always calming (due to the presence in tea of theanine, theophylline, and theobromine, inducing contemplation to those unpracticed in meditation techniques, and often acting as an aid to meditation for those trained in meditative traditions. In place of shadowy Orphism and the

often terrifying Dionysiac rituals, in place of the elevation of Christian communion and the warm bonds of Jewish ritual, and in place of the passion, debate, and action to which secular wine drinkers are roused, tea propels the drinker toward non-action (*wu wei*), simplicity (*pu*), and the doctrine of emptiness central to Taoism and shared by Buddhism.

What of the tea ceremony? For the Chinese, this usually means *Gongfu cha*, or Gongfu tea service, first mentioned by Wu Lu in the 8th century. *Gongfu* means "great skill," and the aim is very similar to that of a European host serving a series of fine wines in beautiful decanters and glasses for a dinner. It is not, in other words, primarily symbolic and intricately codified, as the Japanese tea ceremony is; instead, in the great tradition of Chinese pragmatism, it is quality-oriented and designed to show fine tea at its best. The principles of *gongfu cha* underlie all service in China's tea houses and are widely practiced in

Chinese homes. The teapot and teacups, to Western eyes, appear minute, and the amount of tea used in the pot colossal, but the principle is that of repeated infusions (four or five for green teas, and up to 30 for an aged pu-erh); the skill lies in the tea server ensuring that temperature and strength of liquor remain ideal for the drinkers throughout the service. The purity and temperature of the water (below boiling for green tea, boiling for pu-erh) are important, and the elegance of the accompanying utensils and trays add to the pleasure of the experience, as do the hand gestures of the tea server. The surroundings, too, should be both beautiful and calming.

Japan's tea ceremony is perhaps tea's philosophical pinnacle, though it is much misunderstood. Its Japanese name—*chadō*—means “the way of tea.” There are many variants (some can last four hours); it implies a particular domestic architecture (guests and host arrive through different doors, and the room needs a scroll alcove and ideally a sunken hearth); tea practitioners need not only to master the intricacies of tea production, but costumes, calligraphy, flower arranging, ceramics, and the use of incense are all important. The guests, like the host, have prescribed gestures and actions to follow. Where, one might wonder, is the simplicity in all this?

It lies in the overarching modesty of the undertaking, properly understood. I cannot do better at this point than to quote from Kakuzo Okakura's *The Book of Tea*, the ideal introduction to tea philosophy. “Teaism,” as he calls *chadō*, “is a cult founded on the adoration of the beautiful among the sordid facts of everyday existence. It inculcates purity and

harmony, the mystery of mutual charity, the romanticism of the social order. It is essentially a worship of the Imperfect, as it is a tender attempt to accomplish something possible in this impossible thing we know as life.” Making a cup of tea is the most banal of actions, yet *chadō* seeks to endow this action with universal significance. According to Okakura, “it expresses conjointly with ethics and religion our whole point of view about man and nature. It is hygiene, for it enforces cleanliness; it is economics, for it shows comfort in simplicity rather than in the complex and costly; it is moral geometry, inasmuch as it defines our sense of proportion to the universe.” The ritual prescriptions of the ceremony are a way of preserving the advances of others, but it is a “way” among many other ways, a path among many other paths, and it is the act of embarking on the way that matters, rather than the following or linking of the prescriptions (the signs, the waymarks, the cairns) themselves. *Tao* means “path,” but “The Tao is in the Passage rather than the Path” (Okakura again). This is close to the fundamental engagement of the true philosopher as defined by one of the 20th century's greatest practitioners, Martin Heidegger: *Alles ist Weg* (“all is way”). Heidegger's *Holzwege* (translated by George Steiner as “fire-breaks” or “lumberman's trails”) are given, we might say, a literal form in the gestures of the tea ceremony; they lead us toward the *Lichtung*, the “clearing” or emptiness where we can contemplate the quiddity of things, the being of being. ■

*Teas in this article are available from [www.jingtea.com](http://www.jingtea.com)*

The Japanese tea ceremony is the most intricate of tea rituals, involving calligraphy and costumes as well as tea preparation

