



Taiwan Teachings:

A curious tea lover heads across the world—and some slick mountain roads—to learn about leaf cultivation

story & photos by
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On the first day of our tea journey in Taiwan, my friend Lorraine and I found ourselves on a seemingly endless drive along unpaved roads that snaked dangerously through a hulking mountain range. I found myself having the same thought I did when we staggered onto our flight out of San Francisco at 2 a.m. the day before: “What are we doing?”

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But as we came across those mountains and into the majestic region known as Puli, all the hours of traveling and uncertainty melted away. We had been transported into tea-cultivation heaven. Fog-covered tea gardens—picturesque and perfect—dotted the landscape. It was the kind of world you think only exists in books. What’s more, we were in this wonderland to spend time with KC Chen, a farmer and tea master who would be teaching us the intricacies of growing top-quality leaves. This was a priceless opportunity.

It was early last year that the roots of my Taiwan trip took hold. I had been studying tea for nearly four years as an employee at San Francisco’s Samovar Tea Lounge (Lorraine was my colleague there), and I found myself wanting to better understand what it took to process tea from beginning to end. What did all those dizzying words about oxidation really mean? I was fortunate enough to meet David B. Campbell of the Tillerman Tea Company in Napa, Calif., and through him I found out that the opportunity to explore and understand the processing of oolong and black tea was possible. However, it was locked thousands of miles away.

Campbell is a lifelong tea drinker and has loads of experience traveling to rural areas to learn about the cultures of Taiwan, China and Japan. He spent more than 25 years in the wine business and eventually got involved in tea out of frustration; he says he couldn’t find good teas at fine restaurants and was sick of the peppermint and chamomile varieties waiters kept putting in front of him in restaurants. We instantly had a tea connection, and he organized my itinerary to meet his friend and tea master KC Chen in Taiwan. I had never met Chen and knew almost nothing about him.

When we arrived in Taiwan, we anticipated our names would be written on cardboard signs in the arrivals area of the airport. With no telephone or any idea of who or what to expect, we waited for someone—anyone—to greet us and welcome us to Taiwan. We eventually found our translator, Tinja, who led us to a soft-spoken and well-mannered man. KC Chen was much younger than we expected, a far cry from the stereotype of a tea master.

Chen, a ninth-generation tea grower who has tradition seemingly bred into his bones, drove us from Taipei across those treacherous mountain roads and into Puli. Located near the geographic center of Taiwan, the area around the bustling township is marked by stoic tea gardens and high peaks that surround it on all sides. Chen runs two organic gardens as well as his own tea company called Bih-Lu. Bih-Lu’s small tea factory lies in a quiet area outside of Puli’s busy section.

During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945), the Puli hillsides were covered with tea gardens, according to Chen. The local climate favors the growing and making of tea, and Bih-lu is now into its third generation of ownership and has been in existence for more than 70 years. “I love being in the tea garden,

managing and caring for it,” says Chen. “Having our tea plants in harmony with nature is what gives the very best tea.”

According to Chen, the majority of tea masters in Taiwan only produce oolongs. Chen, however, also produces traditional black tea as well as green and white varieties. He’s had Taiwanese organic certification for several years and plans to apply for international certification next year. “We not only make tea, but we remain connected to the cultivation of the bushes; that’s a vital relationship that is necessary to understand the processes involved in manufacturing the leaf,” says Chen. “It is important to understand the climate, the year’s weather and the interrelationship of these to the final product.”

Campbell says the majority of tea farmers he deals with in Taiwan grow organically, but not necessarily by choice: They often can’t afford the chemicals they would put on the plants if given the opportunity. At the same time, though, they can’t afford to pay for any official certification. “The official organic designation is more important to those who do not deal directly with growers or to consumers looking for reassurance,” Campbell says.

Chen grows leaves for oolong tea in a high-elevation garden near Puli, while most of his black tea production takes place in the other garden, located in the nearby Sun Moon Lake region. “It is an area of extraordinary beauty with high peaks and deep valleys,” says Campbell in regards to Puli. He says it’s this landscape and geographical position that make the area such a good one for growing tea: It’s semi-tropical and provides the necessary humidity, but it also has high elevations that yield the cool temperatures key to quality. “As with apples and grapes or any plant really, it is those that grow at the limits of climatic possibilities that give the best quality,” Campbell says.

The week before we arrived, Puli had been ravaged by a particularly powerful typhoon (called Typhoon Jangmi), and the storm had done damage to the harvest we were there to witness and participate in. The high levels of precipitation caused some of the leaves to become overgrown, and the bridge leading to Chen’s garden was destroyed, making it a difficult and dangerous ride in on the first morning we planned to work.

According to Campbell, typhoons are part of the climate that overall makes Taiwan such a fine production area. However, when they reach the level of Typhoon Jangmi, the damage can be catastrophic, resulting in loss of life and destruction of tea areas and other agricultural enterprises. (Tillerman Tea is currently donating 10 percent of gross sales revenue from its retail, wholesale and online business to the Tzu Chi Foundation to aid with typhoon relief.)

When we finally arrived at the gardens, we were glad to see plants that were still intact, making it possible for us to find some suitable leaves even among those bushes that had become overgrown. Already at work were 20 or so women in extremely bright floral-printed outfits and similar hats; it was almost as if it was a strategically planned wardrobe. This was certainly something I had never experienced or seen before, and it made me smile as



TAIWAN TEA FARMERS: (from left) KC Chen, Lorraine Bobis, Jodet Ghougassian and Mrs. Lynn, a friend of Chen. Chen says that while most tea masters in Taiwan produce only oolongs, he also produces black, green and white tea varieties.

I entered the tea gardens to join them for the day. I wanted to soak all the excitement in, and I felt as though I had just entered a new museum and was determined to learn everything about a particular exhibit.

As we entered the gardens, we received hats and baskets. “You have a long day ahead,” Rebecca, our second translator, said with a laugh as she pointed us to the bushes. The floral-attired ladies—with small razors attached to the tips of their index fingers—surrounded us, quickly picking the best leaves possible in their designated sections. These ladies were quick at identifying healthy leaves and picking them. I made my way into the bushes and started picking, but was quickly scolded by one of the only men in the circle, who mentioned to me in Cantonese or Mandarin (Rebecca had to translate) that I was picking them incorrectly.

According to Chen, the proper way to harvest leaves is to pull at the edge, where the stem meets the leaf and to trim them. In the wake of the typhoon, many of the leaves were overgrown, and it was challenging to find those that were still healthy. And even those that were prime had to be handled delicately. If the stem is pressed and crushed when picked, the flavor will be affected. The two leaves and bud are snapped back, not crushed, and the withering of the leaf starts to take place almost immediately.

We spent an entire afternoon picking leaves with these women, stopping from time to time to click pictures and wipe

away the sweat rolling down our faces. Once the picking was finished, we went to Chen’s small factory by the gardens, where the rest of the processing takes place. We set the leaves out on the floor near a mesh-netted area where they were left to wither and dry. Ah, the smell of fresh tea leaves. It reminded me of ripe apples. After the leaves dried, we transported them inside the factory, where we sorted them and put them on bamboo racks to dry for another eight to 10 hours. There was much to be done from this point forward: drying, kneading, bruising, rolling, shaping and roasting. But for us, all that mattered was sleep. We decided to call it a day.

Yoshi Murai, one of our most avid tea educators at Samovar Tea, has talked to me about how the oxidation of tea is often brought up in marketing and selling situations, but it’s actually not well understood. He thinks the lack of understanding of this rare process is partially due to the fact most tea drinkers don’t really know what goes into oolong tea production as a whole. “We are making headway into it,” he says, “although the task of just describing the tea is so enormous no one has tackled it yet.”

Oolong tea processing is indeed complex. Babette Donaldson, founder of the International Tea Sippers Society, notes that very few people have ever watched a freshly picked tea leaf wither and gradually turn brown. “Understanding oolong is a meditation on

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the transformation of the leaf,” she says.

Each farm has its own production method—there are different styles of plucking, rolling and roasting. And then, of course, there’s also each tea master’s sense of tradition. Campbell says the biggest challenge in oolong processing is maintaining strict quality standards in the face of increasing demand. “It is important to me that tea gardens are run with traditional care that focuses on quality as opposed to volume,” says Campbell. “The proof is always in the cup.”

The day after we picked the leaves, we got to see first-hand how Chen’s operation maintains that sense of quality during processing. First, we learned more about what the purpose was for putting the leaves on bamboo racks for eight to 10 hours, and the mysteries of oxidation started to reveal themselves. While on the racks, the leaves continued the wilting process that began right after they were picked. This is step one of oxidation. The wilting removes the water from the leaves and pulls the moisture out of them so they are strong for shaping.

From that point, machines took over. After putting the leaves in a drying machine (yes, the drying of tea leaves is a multifaceted process, to say the least), the factory workers would roll the leaves into round balls within fabric, and another machine would wrap the balls tighter and tighter. These steps were repeated more than 50 times as Chen’s staff made sure the proper amount of oxidation and rolling took place. All these processes that damaged the surface of the leaves are what allow oxidation to occur—that is, they allowed oxygen to be absorbed by the leaf. The key to creating “semi-oxidized” oolong tea is making sure the perfect amount of heat is added to leaves so that the oxidation process stays within the tea master’s control.

Watching Chen’s factory men ravel and unravel these balls of tightly packed pellets was fascinating. To eliminate the dust from the leaves, another machine was employed, and the product went through yet another round of drying after that. During the 48 hours that followed, we watched the final stage:

the roasting and charcoal roasting of our leaves. I felt like a chemist in the jungles of Puli by the time the whole process came to an end.



PRETTY IN PINK: The proper way to harvest leaves is to pull at the edge, where the stem meets the leaf and to trim them.

I’ve spent much of the year since my trip reflecting on what I experienced and what it means for the actual consumption of tea. Tea culture in the West is growing, and those of us who provide tea for the growing number of aficionados should be developing as well.

Oshan Anand, owner of Om Shan Tea in San Francisco, says the general public has an increased interest in the healing properties of tea and the social and spiritual elements that go along with tea drinking. “The trends in ethical consumerism, healthy lifestyle and desire for authenticity have inspired social consciousness around tea,” Anand says. Those values were evident in the tea gardens of Taiwan as well. Anand says the emphasis on environmental sustainability, purity, gourmet quality and the fusion of ancient techniques with modern innovations is evident in almost every one of Chen’s production methods.

My trip across the world and across those treacherous mountains revealed an enchanting story about the production of an enchanting drink. I’m excited to tell that story to every tea lover I meet. ☪