

THE BANA TEA LEAF

A NEWSLETTER FOR TEA CONNOISSEURS & ENTHUSIASTS

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MARCH 2009

A LETTER TO MY PU'ERH FRIENDS

FIRST, LET ME WISH YOU a happy, healthy and prosperous Year of the Ox. I would like to thank you for your support of the Bana Tea Company. I hope the Pu'erh teas I have selected and the information I have provided on the website have enriched your tea-drinking experience.

It has been a great pleasure for me to have had the opportunity to exchange ideas with some of you and to share our common passion for tea over the last couple of months since the inception of the company. It is my intent to use the newsletter to bring you all the latest about Pu'erh tea and answer whatever questions you may have. I will be making my annual tea trip to Yunnan, China in April. Stay tuned to the next issue of The Bana Tea Leaf newsletter for more news and photos sometime in June 2009.

2009 will be an interesting year, marked with challenges and opportunities. Don't forget to reserve some time to enjoy a cup of Pu'erh tea. Here is a quote from my webmaster, who became a Pu'erh enthusiast during the time she developed the website. She said, "Stopping for a cup of Pu'erh tea has meant a moment of personal time, aroma therapy, an energy lift and a privileged feeling like I am enjoying the very best tea in the world." I think she sums it up so very well.

Sincerely, Linda Louie
*Owner, Bana Tea Company
Purveyor of fine Pu'erh Teas*



After a long day, coming home to a cup of Pu'erh tea surrounds one with a feeling of serenity and calm.

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IS THE TEA REAL PU'ERH... OR COULD IT BE FAKE?

A CUSTOMER RECENTLY ASKED ME whether there are many "fake" Pu'erh teas in the market. The answer is yes and no. Let me explain what I mean by that. Most of the Pu'erh teas sold in the market are real Pu'erh in the sense that they are made of the Yunnan Daiyeh (Camillia Assamica variety). The question is whether you are getting what you paid for. With China's recent remarkable economic growth, many Chinese are able to enjoy and collect Pu'erh tea, long coveted by tea connoisseurs from Hong Kong and Taiwan. As such, Pu'erh teas from the ancient trees and old vintage Pu'erh became collectors items and their prices have been on the up-swing for the past 15 years.

Tea vendors and wholesalers wanted to reap the benefits of the boom by increasing production. As you know, Pu'erh, particularly those from old-growth trees and the vintage Pu'erh are limited in production. To meet the market demand, imitation vintage Pu'erh teas and counterfeits began to surface, causing many consumers to fall victim to misrepresentations and to overpaying for their teas.

If you are a novice Pu'erh drinker, you may not be able to discern the difference between real vintage Pu'erh and a "fake vintage" Pu'erh that has been aged artificially by "wet storage" to mimic

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HOW TO BE A SMART PU'ERH PURCHASER

Not only are occasional Pu'erh drinkers fooled, professionals can be fooled also. Whether Pu'erh novice or professional, one needs to utilize common sense and trust his or her natural instincts. When it comes to buying Pu'erh, the most important thing is to taste it before you buy. Good Pu'erh, new or old, gives you a comfortable sensation in your mouth and a sense of well-being after consumption. The flavor should be clean without any odd taste or odor. One of the most unique characteristics of quality Pu'erh is its lingering aftertaste. For some newer Pu'erh, you may find it a bit bitter or grassy when your tongue first comes in contact with the tea. However, a second or two later, the grassiness will

turn into a sweetness that coats your mouth. Low quality Pu'erh usually is flat and lacks the body that quality



Bana Tea's Sampler Pack is a good way to try an assortment of teas.

Pu'erh offers. Additionally, the brew from good quality Pu'erh should be clean, bright and translucent, not dull or cloudy. Also, the more specific information the tea vendor provides, such as the exact vintage, harvesting season, region where the tea was produced, the higher the likelihood you are buying a good product. Vendors who want to make a quick profit usually do not care about tea and will not invest the time to gather the information about the tea. Pu'erh teas produced in recent years are required to pass the inspection from the Yunnan Food Administration. You may find a certificate number and a blue "S" logo on the wrapping which serves as a verification that the product has passed an inspection for food safety.

TEA BITS: QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: WHY IS THERE A PIECE OF PAPER EMBEDDED IN EACH PU'ERH CAKE?

A: The small piece of paper found in a Pu'erh cake is called a "Nei Fei," which literally means "inside ticket." The paper, with a logo or special identification chop printed on it, was historically used to identify the maker of the tea cake and to prevent counterfeits. Nowadays, this inside ticket is often used to authenticate ancient vintage teacakes.

Q: WHY IS THERE A DIMPLE AT THE BOTTOM OF A TEA CAKE?

A: Even today, most Pu'erh tea cakes are hand made. A pre-weighted amount of sun-dried tea leaves is placed inside a round can and placed in a steamer. When the leaves wilt from the heat, they are transferred to a round cotton bag. The tea artisan then twists the open-end of the bag, pressing the steamed tea to the bottom of the bag with each wring, pushing the resulting knot into the cake and thereby forming the dimple.

Q: HOW DID PU'ERH TEA GET ITS NAME?

A: Pu'erh tea is the name of a town in the Southwest corner of Yunnan China. There is no tea production in this town.

Rather, it was a tea trading place where teas were collected and distributed to different regions in China. It is also the starting point of the famous "Old Tea Horse Road."

Q: WHERE IS THE BIRTH PLACE OF TEA?

A: It is believed that the origin of tea and its ascendancy began in the southwestern edge of China bordering with Myanmar and Laos. The area is around today's Xishuangbana region of Yunnan Province, a very famous Pu'erh producing region.

Q: WHAT IS THE AGE OF THE OLDEST TEA TREE?

A: The oldest tea tree can be found near the town of FengQing, Lincang County, Yunnan Province, China. This tree is estimated to be 3,200 years old. Up until 2007 when a ban was imposed, the tree yielded 13 kilos of tea leaves per year. If the presumed age is accurate, this tea tree first took root at the time of the Trojan War, was over 800 years-old at the time of the Peloponnesian Wars and already 1200 years old at the birth of Christ.

Q: WHEN WAS "RIPE" PU'ERH TEA FIRST INTRODUCED?

A: The technology to produce "ripe" Pu'erh tea was first developed by the Kunming Tea Factory in 1973 and was implemented by most other tea factories by 1976.

Q: WHAT ARE THE MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PU'ERH TEA AND OTHER BLACK TEAS (OR "RED TEAS," AS THEY ARE CONSIDERED AMONG CHINESE)?

A: There are two major differences: 1) Black teas complete their processing from green tea to black tea within several days while the processing of raw Pu'erh tea into a black tea takes place over a much longer period of time; and 2) Pu'erh tea undergoes a biological change through a fermentation process rather than an oxidative (chemical) change.



In ancient China, tea was drunk not from tea cups but from tea bowls. The tea bowl shown above is believed to be from the Sung Dynasty (cir. 907-1279 CE).

TRAINING YOUR PALATE

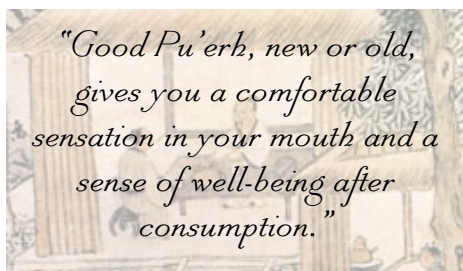
TO INCREASE THE SENSITIVITY OF YOUR PALATE, try Pu'erh teas of different quality or different price ranges. By doing so, you will learn to be able to discern the differences between the characteristics of good and average quality Pu'erh. If you are attentive to the taste of the tea and drink it sip by sip, it is not hard to sense the different qualities (or lack thereof) each tea possesses. I personally love this exercise because it calls for my mindfulness and augments my senses - things I frequently neglect to do in the midst of hurrying to meet my daily demands.



IS THE TEA REAL PU'ERH...

OR FAKE? *continued from page 1*

the look and taste of aged Pu'erh. While ripe Pu'erh also has been artificially aged by adding water/humidity to foster the fermentation of the tea (a process called "Wu Dui"), that process requires careful monitoring by an experienced tea master. As such, the use of the water, grades of leaves used, control of temperatures, and the intervals by which the tea piles are turned are closely supervised.



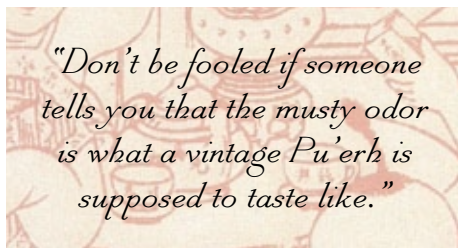
Leaves used in the "wet storage" production method are usually of inferior quality. The storage could take place in a room of an industrial building with poor ventilation and the water used is most likely from the tap. Consequently, most Pu'erh teas that went through "wet storage" possess a lingering musty or foreign odor. Don't be fooled if someone tells you that the musty odor is what a vintage Pu'erh is supposed to taste like.

Unethical tea vendors and wholesalers also attempt to fool consumers by selling counterfeits of teas, alleging the teas originate from some famous tea producing regions. For example, I visited a very

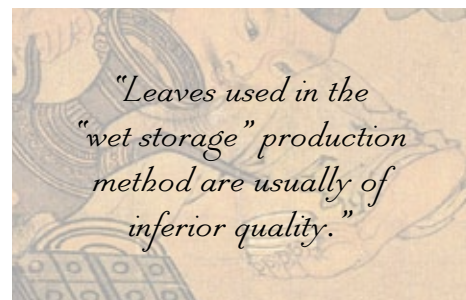


Bana Limited Edition Pu'erh Tea being packed into tungs in Yunnan.

famous tea producing mountain with my tea master called Lao BanZhang last Spring. Teas from Lao BanZhang are highly regarded and expensive because they are reputed to possess good



strength and have great aging potential. Lao BanZhang is not a big area and the tea trees are naturally grown in a forest-like environment. These tea gardens are still privately owned by the indigenous families living on the mountain. It is said that the area can only yield about



10 tons of leaves annually and that an owner of a new tea factory has monopolized the harvest, excluding other vendors from buying the tea. However, I found large quantities of "Lao BanZhang" tea cakes in various stores selling at high prices. It is believed that either some of these tea cakes are counterfeits or only a small portion of the leaves comprised in these cakes actually come from Lao BanZhang.

ABOUT BANA TEA COMPANY AND GREEN PACKAGING

BANA TEA COMPANY IS DEDICATED TO propagating the joy and pleasure of storing, aging and imbibing Pu'erh tea. Bana Tea Company carries a select line of teas and tea accessories that will enhance your Pu'erh tea enjoyment. Our Bana-brand teas leaves are picked from old-growth tea trees between 100 to 400 years old and are harvested and sun-dried by the ethnic minorities who are native to Yunnan, China. Bana Tea Company's tea cakes contain 100% top grade tea leaves. We do not mix higher and lower grades together. To preserve the ancient traditions of Pu'erh tea, our tea cakes are wrapped in natural cotton papers and packaged in "tungs," which are comprised of five tea cakes bundled in natural bamboo leaves, a packaging method dating back to over a thousand years ago. To ensure the quality and integrity of our product, the production of our tea cakes is closely supervised and monitored by our tea master and his staff.

Having been raised by parents who endured hardships through probably the most politically tumultuous period in Chinese history, I was raised in a household demanding conservation and



Pictured above is the natural packaging of bamboo sheafs and fiber lashing that many Pu'erh tea cakes are wrapped in. It is called a 'tung'.

that nothing be wasted. Being "green" comes naturally. Therefore, while the packaging for Bana Tea products must be aesthetically pleasing, it must also have a second life. From the elegant round Pu'erh storage boxes, the sheer organza bags containing our tea samplers, to the satin pouches that hold our double-walled teacups, the packaging can be used again for multiple purposes. A customer recently asked to purchase

several of our tea boxes for his wife to store her "girly things." The clear window on the cover allows items inside to be viewed. The boxes are stackable so they are very space efficient as well. The satin pouch is not only beautiful to look at but it is also padded and can therefore store and transport small Yixing teapots. Put anything in the pouch and pull the strings and it will store any item with pizzazz.

- Linda Louie, *Tea Purveyor*



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In a time very distant, in a land that today is still little changed, tea trees were planted in the midst of tropical forests by the indigenous peoples of southwestern Yunnan. These natives later came to be known as the Hani, a non-Han Chinese minority group, and the forest areas are now known as "tea gardens." Dating back about 1700 years, these ancient tea gardens are some of the treasures of modern day Yunnan Province and the pride of the Hani people. They produce some of the finest and most sought-after teas in the world.

Tea trees of an ancient tea garden.

