



The History and Mystery of Puerh

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TEA PROFILE:

Sheng Puerh

Puerh Tea • Yunnan Province, China

Sheng is a Puerh tea which is produced like a green tea. It is created from the leaves of either *c. assamica* or *c. taliensis*.

Sheng Puerh undergoes an ageing process that is very sensitive to the climatic conditions around it.



TEA PROFILE:

Shou Puerh

Puerh Tea • Yunnan Province, China

Shou is a ripe Puerh. Shou is also known as “cooked” puerh and it was originally created to mimic the taste, aroma, and colour of a traditional sheng puerh in the 1970s.

The processing it undergoes is far quicker than that of Sheng Puerh, and although it was created to mimic Sheng Puerh, it has a vastly different taste.

PUERH TEA

The Mystery

Puerh tea is one of China's great treasures, of which the west knows little about. It is unlike any other type of tea in the world, and has many similarities to a fine wine.

For the average person, it's very difficult to distinguish between a good puerh and a bad one. Other things that may confuse one's attempts to discover a good puerh include:

- Many claims about a given puerh's health benefits, but what makes it unique?
- There are so many counterfeits!
- There are also many, many different shapes, which can confuse inexperienced buyers.
- The smell can be discerning to the palate.

PUERH TEA

An Introduction

Puerh is a fermented style of tea that takes its name as a geographically marked product of Yunnan. That means that a true Puerh can only come from Yunnan Province in China, with all other fermented and post-fermented teas known as *dark tea*.

Why is this distinction important? Because tea grown and produced in Yunnan has different characteristics than tea produced in other areas. Beyond simple processing methods and the cultivars used, Yunnan Province offers unique terroirs that are not able to be replicated elsewhere.

Terroir refers to an area's climate, soil, and other environmental conditions that affect plant growth.

PUERH TEA

An Introduction

Puerh is made from the large leaf variety of the tea tree, which has been sundried. Some of the most famous puerhs come from trees over one thousand years old, which have been maintained by generation after generation of cultivators.

The tea itself is available as a loose leaf, but it is also commonly compressed into cakes, bricks, and hundreds of other shapes and sizes.

PUERH TEA

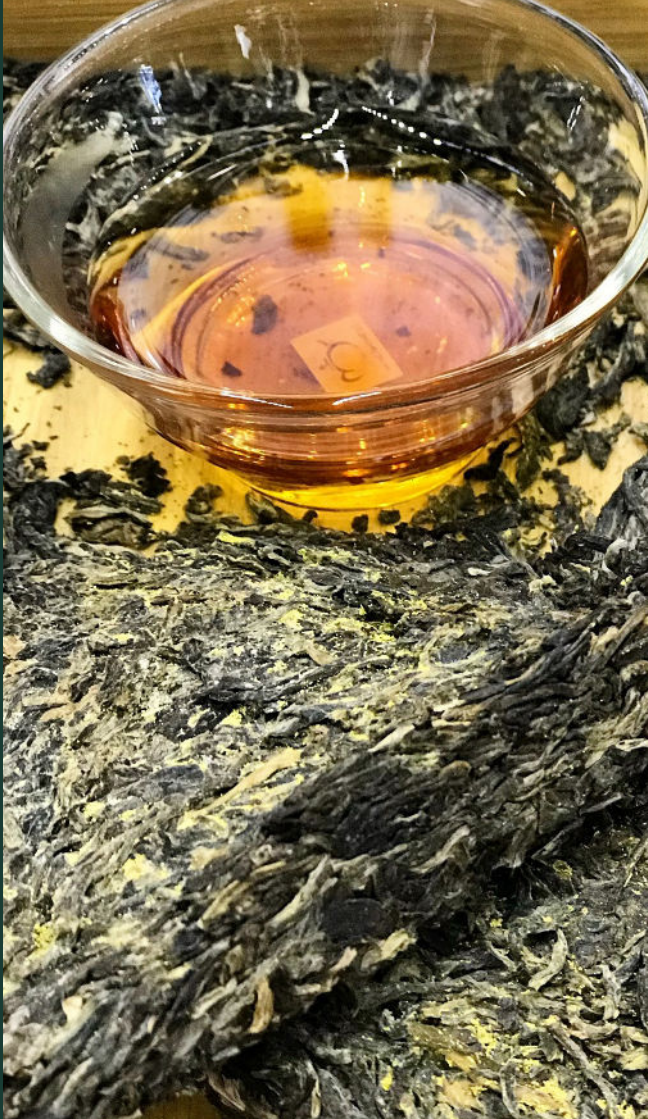
What Makes a Puerh?

The quality of a puerh is primarily dependent on its raw material. Puerh is primarily derived from the large leaf variety of *Camellia Sinensis*, the specimens of which were originally thought to be exclusively var. *Assamica*, but are now also identified as var. *Taliensis*.

The unique geographical environment in Yunnan gives the tea a unique taste. In many ways it can be compared to a fine red wine: For example, just like a good wine, a good puerh is mellow. In particular you are looking for astringent grapes, just as you are looking for astringent leaves, as these are what help produce that mellow flavour.

When making puerh, small leaves such as those found on var. *Sinensis* simply are not astringent enough. Large leaves stand the test of time and are fantastic for ageing, as well as for artificial fermentation.





PUERH TEA

Fermentation

Tea fermentation refers to the microbial reaction from stacking the leaves in a moist environment. It can be quite similar to, or even compared with, composting.

The types of micro-organisms that develop puerh's aged taste also develop the taste of many other food products, such as cheese, wine, some types of baked goods, yoghurt, and beer.

In order to produce a good aged puerh, it is essential to keep these micro-organisms in good health. The three primary factors that affect this are temperature, humidity, and air flow.

PUERH TEA

History

It is thought that the area where the Chinese, Burmese, and Indian borders intersect is where the very first tea plants originated.

Over 2000 years ago tea was a commodity trade in what is now known as Yunnan Province, with tea being exported through the ancient Tea Horse Trail. We also know that about 1400 years ago, locals from Yunnan began to export tea to Tibet in exchange for horses.

At this time, there was no special processing involved in producing tea. The leaves were simply picked and dried before being consumed or sold, and this continued into the Han Dynasty. It was not until the Ming Dynasty (approximately 800 years ago) that raw puerh was developed.

Ripe puerh is a relatively new offering, having first been created in the 1970s.



OOLONG TEA

The Tea Horse Trail

The ancient tea route, the Tea Horse Trail, runs from Tibet to Vietnam through Yunnan, with its purpose being to export tea from Yunnan Province in both directions.

Bundles of loose leaf tea were tied to pack animals and they were led through long treks through the Himalayas, sometimes for more than a year. This method proved difficult and often resulted in tea spillages, costing traders valuable time and money.

After a time, traders began to compress their tea, which resulted in a better profit and a safer delivery. Unexpectedly however, the compressed tea was actually found to be better than the loose leaf, and gained its own popularity among purchasers.



The four main puer production districts in Yunnan:



PUERH TEA

Yunnan's Natural Environment

The Yunnan area is a fantastic example of harmony and diversity in a rainforest-like environment. Instead of being cut down, the natural tree canopies above traditional tea gardens are maintained, an effort that works in harmony with the conservations of forests and with biodiversity. This dense forest canopy helps to suppress weeds and protect the soil from erosion.

As an interesting note, in many other areas pests like wasps would be a troublesome or potentially deadly problem for tea pickers making their way through tea gardens. However, the native wasps in Yunnan apparently do not sting the pickers. This helps increase the safety of the people who harvest the leaves.

PUERH TEA

Ancient Tea Trees

Yunnan is home to some of the most ancient tea trees in the world. Within the province, the areas with the oldest established tea trees are the Six Tea Mountains, with some of the trees being hundreds of years old, and a few up to a thousand. As a result, tea trees unlike any others on earth exist deep within the heart of southern Yunnan Province.

In particular, the jungles of Xishuangbanna and the districts of Simao and Lincang are home to some of the world's oldest trees.



PUERH TEA

The 1970s

Shou Puerh was first developed in the 1970s, in Kunming. Sheng Puerh was expensive and not as accessible to the general Chinese population, so this was an attempt to make a product that imitated the taste of Sheng Puerh without the lengthy processing time.

Although Shou Puerh became a vastly cheaper alternative, despite its intentions to mimic Sheng Puerh, it has a vastly different taste. This has led to it developing its own following among tea connoisseurs, with specific characteristics favoured over others.



PUERH TEA

The Market Boom

During the Chinese New Year of 2004, puerh had become so expensive and revered that three grams of puerh that had been stored in the Palace Museum was auctioned off for 4,000 RMB, or 32 times the price of gold.

The climb did not end there. During 2006 and 2007, the puerh market skyrocketed to new heights. Tea collectors in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Guangzhou were creating large amounts of additional interest in puerh tea, and trading it quickly became a Chinese national obsession. In 2006 seven pieces of puerh cake were auctioned for 1.6 million RMB, and in 2007, just one piece of cake went for a staggering 400,000 RMB.

Unfortunately, due to the skyrocketing price, a large amount of poor quality tea was produced and flooded the market. This undermined confidence and in 2008 the puerh boom suddenly collapsed, effectively ruining the tea market.



PUERH TEA

Interesting Facts

- Puerh production is regulated in a similar way to wine.
- Regulations must be followed or the tea cannot be called Puerh.
- Ageing puerh causes it to transform from being quite bitter to more sweet and smooth.
- Ageing works best with good quality leaves. Unfortunately, ageing will not help to improve a low quality puerh.
- Not all puerhs age.
- Old ancient arbour trees give the tea a richer flavour.

To be a puerh:

- It must be from var. Taliensis or var. Assamica.
- It must come from Yunnan Province.

PUERH TEA

There are Three Types of Puerh

- Sheng Puerh (Raw)
- Sheng Puerh (Aged)
(average of 5 years)
- Shou Puerh (Cooked)



PUERH TEA

All tea undergoes the same initial processing

- Picking the leaf
Harvesting starts in February and March, then continues through til November. The pick is usually one bud and 3 to 4 leaves.
- Sorting
- Withering
- Applying heat usually through stir roasting
- Rolling
Now usually by machine.
- Drying
Sun drying is preferable but sometimes the tea is baked by the fire.



PUERH TEA

Maocha

Maocha is tea that has undergone processing but is not yet ready to sell at retail level. Usually, Maocha needs to undergo some additional steps, such as:

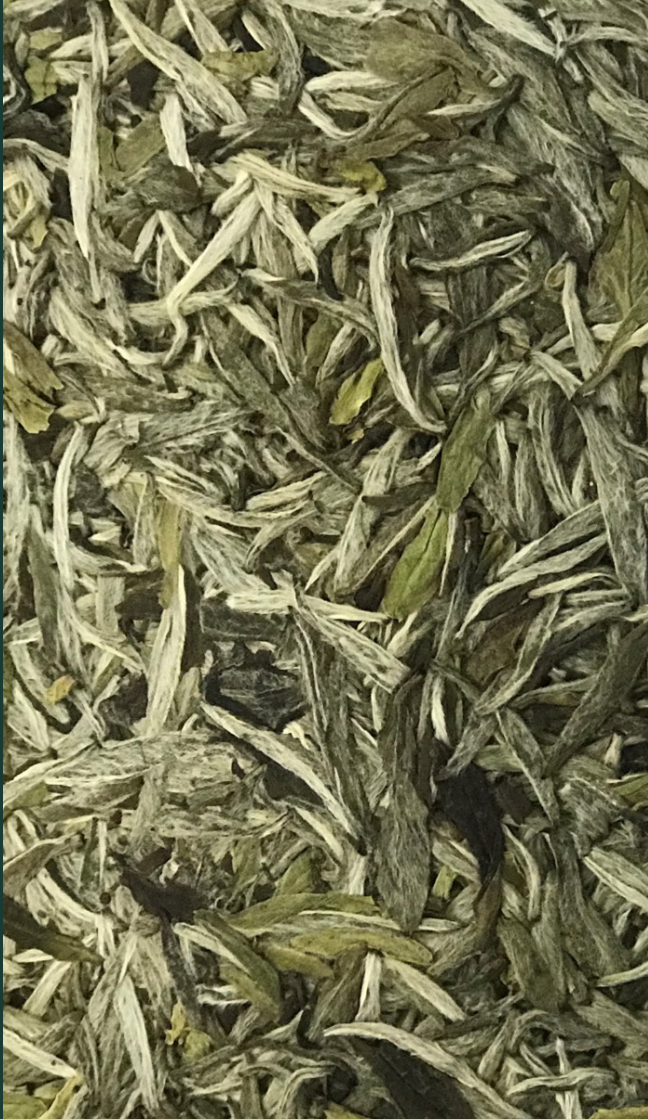
- Sorting twigs, insects, sometimes leaf sizes
- One more round of heating in some form is usually done before wholesale

Although maocha is referred to as crude tea, it is still consumable and tasty.

PUERH TEA

Fine Processing

- Loose maocha is steamed, shaped by machine or hand-pressed, dried or wrapped.
- Artificially fermented puerh is piled indoors at a specific humidity and temperature.
- Natural fermentation occurs during long-term storage.



PUERH TEA

Identifying Good Puerh

- Is it from the forest, or is it from terrace tea?
- Forest teas are made from wild tea trees
- Terrace tea is usually made from bushes which have been planted since the 1970s.
- It is thought that Forest tea is pesticide free and fertilizer free due to the healthy ecosystem in Yunnan.



PUERH TEA

What can affect the taste of Puerh?

Air

- Even circulation is important and sometimes it is good to expose your puerh to fresh air. This will help facilitate the ongoing reproduction of micro organisms that occur naturally and keep the flavour even.

Humidity

- Low humidity will affect reproduction of the micro organisms and high humidity can produce mould.

Temperature

- A good range is between 20C - 30C.

PUERH TEA

What can affect the taste of Puerh?

Storage

- Tea has a low moisture level, making it very absorbant. As a result, it will absorb other odours if it is placed near them
- The container type can affect your tea. The storage area should be a cool dry place, and the container can be an unglazed clay pot, or a paper bag / cardboard box.
- Do not mix sheng and shou puerh.
- If stored correctly, aged puerh is best at approximately 60 years.

History of the Tea

- How was it handled prior to your purchasing of it? How was it stored?



PUERH TEA

Who Likes What?

Usually a beginner in experiencing puerh will appreciate the cooked or ripe puerh (shou). As one gets more familiar and experienced, one tends to gain more of an affinity for the raw puerh (sheng).

We always recommend that when you first taste ripe puerh, don't smell the aroma. Instead, taste the liquor first.



PUERH TEA

Loose Leaf Puerh

Leaves of loose leaf puerh usually come from the various mountains in Yunnan. They are blended together, giving two main types of blends:

- From the bushes (leaves)
- From the trees (arbour)

Loose leaf has more air exposure, which means it can develop an aged taste more quickly. In many cases it is also more convenient, as a full cake need not be purchased.



PUERH TEA

Compressed Puerh

Compressed puerh goes through an additional compressing and shaping process to form a cake in various shapes and sizes.

Some shapes are very highly compressed, which in turn makes ageing slower and more difficult. A lower compression will mean there is more surface air available to the tea, allowing it to age quicker.



PUERH TEA

Sheng Puerh (Young)

Sheng Puerh is kept as a loose leaf tea and is first blended before it is ready to be formed and pressed. After being pressed into cakes, it is placed in storage.

As for the taste, younger Sheng puerhs may give you an experience of bitterness, or characteristics likened to green teas. As the Sheng begins to age, you will notice notes of stewed apricots and a grassy freshness develop.

The tea can be quite astringent while young, but bitter notes will soften as the tea ages. These changes in flavour occur far more quickly in the loose leaf variety.



PUERH TEA

Sheng Puerh (Aged)

It is thought that an aged puerh will be at its best at approximately 60 years of age. This tea will have some notes of wood and earth, with hints of fruit and a slight aroma of camphor.

Astringency becomes mild as the puerh becomes older. The tea has a good depth of body at approximately 5 years of age, however the changes in flavour will diminish in loose leaf puerh much more quickly due to the presence of more surface air.



PUERH TEA

Shou Puerh (Cooked)

Shou production includes an accelerated process of creating piles of moistened tea leaves and covering them.

Today, Menghai is known as the best place to produce Shou Puerh due to the natural environment and their processing methods.

The tea will be less complex than an aged Raw puerh because it has undergone an accelerated processing method. It has a thicker flavour than Sheng and can be likened to an earthy latte with a mushroomy type of sweetness.

Shou puerh will only change slightly over time, and in the loose leaf form, only minimal changes will occur if any at all.

PUERH TEA

Nei Fei (The Trademark)





PUERH TEA

Health Benefits

Puerh originally became famous in Tibet, Hong Kong and Beijing where people were drinking it to help digest greasy foods. In traditional Chinese medicine, however, there are many claims regarding the tea. These claims include:

- That it aids in digestion and contains natural prebiotics
- That it helps to reduce blood pressure
- That it helps to reduce cholesterol
- That it helps break down fats
- It was also found to be good for altitude sickness and gout.

It is believed aged puerh has less caffeine than new puerh, and that sheng puerh contains more caffeine than shou puerh.



Traditional puerh teapot with thicker, more porous clay.



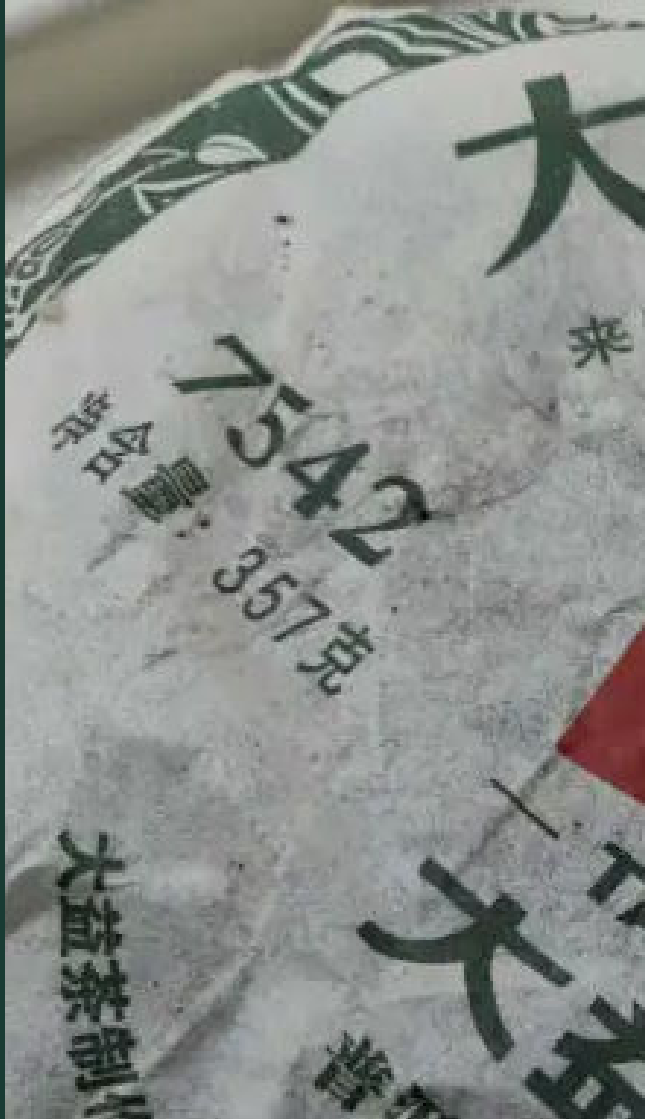
PUERH TEA

Secret Codes

Puerh even has secret codes and recipes! For example, you might see a sequence of numbers upon a cake. Of these numbers:

- The first two digits correspond to the year the blend was introduced (not manufactured)
- The third digit determines the leaf size, from 1 to 9
- The fourth digit denotes the factory.

But the best way to learn about your puerh is not to look at these labels, but to taste it!





PUERH TEA

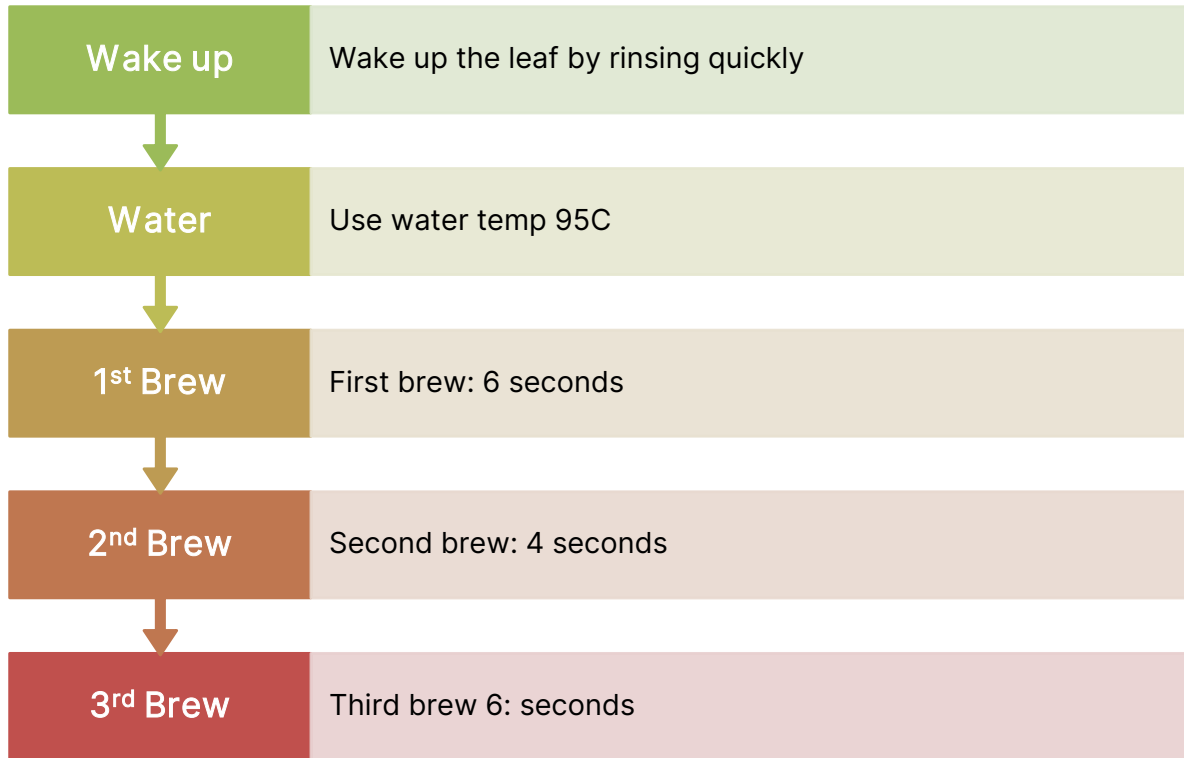
A Bing Cha

A Bing Cha is puerh tea in the form of a round cake or disc, the traditional and standard shape. It will weigh exactly 357 grams and is packed into lots of seven cakes.

A Bing Cha is the most common shape of puerh you will encounter, and is the image many people conjure in their heads when asked to think of puerh tea.

HOW TO BREW PUERH

Loose Leaf Shou



HOW TO BREW PUERH

Compressed Puerh



PUERH TEA

There is a popular saying:





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