



China's Legendary Spring Green Teas

By Mary Lou Heiss



China produces more green tea than any country in the world. And such volume doesn't just represent a mountain of tea, China's green teas are comprised of thousands of distinctions of leaf configurations and styles, making the available selection nothing short of overwhelming.

In the historic green tea growing regions of eastern China the most celebrated tea gardens are in the so-called Golden Triangle—the regions of Anhui, Jiangxi and Zhejiang provinces. Here, steep, rugged mountains dominate much of the topography, and the landscape is classical and stunning. The most famous tea mountains—Huang Shan, Jingang Shan, Mogan Shan, Qi Shan, Tianmu Shan—rise over five thousand feet. Driving up into these cloud-and-mist shrouded mountains, one finds isolated tea gardens covering the countryside in rhythmic, flowing patterns; a soothing visual interrupted only by well-worn footpaths that disappear around the curves and bends of hillsides.

The green tea harvests begin at slightly differing times in the various tea producing provinces and green tea producing regions that stretch across the vast expanse of China. As the progression of the season provides larger and more mature leaf for the workers to pluck, different teas are made. But connoisseurs of green tea eagerly await the spring green teas; those teas made from

the first flush of tender young leaf in the earliest weeks of the spring. These teas are especially flavorful and aromatic—in fact, the flavor of some spring tea suggests that the crisp chill of the last snow was still in the air when the leaf was plucked.

The spring green tea season begins in China just after bud break, when the emerging leaves are still tender. In eastern China, the plucking of these teas (known as “Before the Rains” teas) begins in late March and continues into the second week of May. The arrival of the rains in mid-to-late May momentarily stops the harvest, giving both humans and plants time to recharge. After the rains end in late June, the main tea harvest gets underway, and the bulk of China's ordinary, commercial tea is picked.

Over the course of the spring growing season, each tea-producing region manufactures numerous spring green teas, some of which are China's “Famous Teas”: Lu Shan Guapian, Huang Shan Mao Feng and Tai Ping Hou Kui. At one time China's Famous Teas were imperial teas—teas that were manufactured solely as ‘tribute’ to the emperor. Only the emperor and those in his court that he deemed worthy were granted permission to sip cups of this ‘celestial nectar.’ When China's dynasty period came to an end in the 20th century, these teas became known as Famous Teas. Today, these teas are



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known throughout China and are a source of pride for the tea workers in the historic regions where they originate.

Spring green teas differ in specific ways. First, each type of tea requires that the freshly plucked leaf be of a certain size and configuration. The choicest configuration, *mao feng*, consists of two leaves of equal length and a bud; next comes *mao jian*, a single leaf and a bud. *Mao feng* teas have a broad, flat shape and a sword-like curve from tip to end, while *mao jian* teas are thin and delicate, with a wiry twist to the leaf. Second, the drying and shaping technique used to process the fresh leaf gives each tea a characteristic appearance that teas produced later in the season cannot have. Even in the best of weather conditions, the season for tender spring green tea is short, yielding only a small amount of precious leaf. The seasonal average for spring green tea comprises a mere ten-to-twelve percent of the annual green tea harvest.

Timing is critical in the spring green tea harvest, as the emerging leaves change form daily, requiring a continual adjustment in styles of pluck and process-

ing. While each tea producing region crafts teas that are unique to its region, skilled leaf pluckers and leaf processors in each tea village will work with the season and style of the leaf to make several different teas during the course of the year.

For those who still follow traditional methods, the size of the leaf will determine which tea will be made from each day's crop. As with any handmade product, each freshly plucked and processed batch of tea is distinct, its nuances revealing the hand of the maker and ultimately contributing to the pleasure of the steeped tea. The tea that was made yesterday will differ from the one made several days earlier in the season, and what was made by one tea processor will differ slightly from that made by his neighbor.

At the height of the tea season, the work is hard and the hours are long. The entire tea village moves to the needs and rhythms of the harvest. At daybreak, the tea pluckers—mainly young women—fan out into the tea gardens, often times climbing up or down steep dirt paths to arrive at their designated plucking spot. Moving deftly row by row, they gather fresh leaf as the morning

passes. Skilled tea pluckers must possess long, slender fingers for agility and reach, and their fingers must also be strong enough to quickly pluck the leaves from the tea bushes without ripping or tearing the plants or the leaves. The pluckers drop the delicate leaves into woven bamboo baskets slung diagonally over their shoulder, and empty them as they fill. Plucking stops by noon, by which time the first batch of fresh leaf that was brought into the tea factory in the early morning has been turned into finished tea.

In all of the provinces that manufacture green tea, the leaves are processed in essentially the same way. Each day's harvest is turned into finished tea the same day or by early the following morning. Green tea retains its fresh green color and soft, vegetal flavor because the leaves are not allowed to undergo oxidative change. It is the nature of fresh leaf to oxidize (darken from internal chemical changes) once it is plucked, so the fresh leaf for green tea must be processed very quickly.

The fresh leaf enters the tea factory and is placed in large, low piles on bamboo mats laid out on the floor. The leaf is first put through a de-enzyming process, which heats the leaf just enough to remove excess moisture but not enough to actually begin drying the leaf. At this point, the leaf is set back on the mats to cool and rest, and it is called primary tea.

The primary tea is then sorted, a task usually performed by women seated at long rectangular tables. From a pile of primary tea, each woman pulls a few handfuls close to her and inspects it for bits of twig, torn leaf, or oddly shaped leaf. The discard is sent off in one direction and the sorted leaf in another. Each sorter works for an entire eight-hour shift and can sort as much as one hundred pounds of leaf each day. Once sorted, the primary leaf is ready for firing, shaping, final firing and final sorting. This careful tending of the fresh leaf will result in a successful finished product.

Pan-firing and basket-firing are the two traditional methods used for shaping and drying Chinese spring green teas. Pan-firing is carried out in an apparatus that resembles an oversized wok. The pans are built into a cement workstation, and are heated from below by charcoal fire, gas or electricity. When charcoal is used, a fire-tender must be present to feed the firebox and watch that the flame neither goes out nor becomes too hot. Pan-fired teas can be fired and shaped in the pan, or the leaf can be removed from the pan and shaped by hand on a shaping table. Once the tea on the shaping table has cooled and the leaf begins to 'take shape' the leaf is returned to the firing pan for the final drying.

Pan operators are highly proficient workers who use a precise sequence of quickly executed hand movements to shape and dry the leaf. Some leaf is fluffed into tight twists; other leaf is flattened with the palm of a hand. Some leaf processors add a little 'hook' to the end of a twisted leaf; others can compress the tea into very tiny folded leaf. The entire back and forth sequence in and out of the pan is repeated as many times as is required to finish the tea. Traditional pan firing of *Longjing* (Dragonwell) tea requires a repetition of eight to ten hand movements to shape and finish it properly, and the tea is not removed from the firing pan during



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the shaping. *Longjing* acquires a long, flat, shiny appearance from the constant pressing and manipulation. Upon brewing *Longjing*, the infused leaf reveals that what appears to be separate tea leaves are actually a precise pluck that is comprised of two tender leaves cupped around a slender bud. This fulfills the Chinese expectation for a hand-processed tea, which is that the steeped leaf returns to the original size and shape of the fresh leaf and it underscores the expertise of the tea processor who crafted it. *Bi Lo Chun* (Green Snail Spring) is a very tiny curled leaf that unfurls to a larger than expected size when steeped. During the pan firing of *Bi Lo Chun*, proficient pan-firers gently gather moist leaf into balls roughly the size of an orange and gently roll the ball of tea around the firing pan guided by the palm of their hand. As they do this, they gently exert a light pressure on the ball of tea. This motion reduces the bulk of the tea as it dries and it also begins to set the final shape of the leaf. Throughout this process, the balls of tea are broken apart and returned to a scattering of loose leaf in the bottom of the tea-firing pan before the leaves are gathered together and rolled once again.

Basket-firing is another traditional method used for firing and shaping primary tea. For large tea firing baskets, it requires two workers moving in unison in smooth rhythm to lift the basket and move it on and off a low, well-contained ember fire. When the basket is removed from the heat, the workers shape the leaf; when the basket is placed back over the heat, the workers care-

fully keep the leaf in constant motion as it slowly dries.

Villagers make the tea firing baskets from bamboo that they harvest from the surrounding countryside. At Qi Shan, an organic tea factory in the Huo Mountains of Anhui province, the baskets are a one-piece construction. The baskets are nearly table height, and are approximately three feet in diameter. The tops of the baskets have a conical center and sides that gently slope towards a raised edge. The bottoms of the baskets are wide and constructed with an open bottom to allow the baskets to straddle the low ember fire. Using this method, two basket firers can make about twenty-five kilos of tea per day. Basket-fired teas sometimes have a slight charcoal-fired flavor and aroma, and the leaf is bulkier and more wiry than that of a pan-fired tea. Pan-fired teas have a rich, toasty flavor from the direct contact with the heat of the pan. Each tea-firing pan holds about 1 kilo of tea at a time.

Spring green teas brew a soft, pale green liquor tinged with gold; the best teas are sweet, mild and slightly grassy. The lyrical names of these teas—Bubbling Spring, Clouds and Mist, Curled Dragon Silver Tips, Jade in the Clouds, Purple Bamboo, Rain Flower, Snow Dragon, White Monkey Paw—are an aesthetic reflection of China's ancient tea culture. When sipping one of these lovely green teas, one can imagine how beguiling these tea mountains must have been to Song dynasty poets, artists and hermits who drew inspiration not just from these glorious teas but also from the bamboo groves, waterfalls and stands of graceful pines that share the landscape of the tea gardens.

The Leaf

