

Varieties of Tea in Korea

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Although there are minute genetic differences between the various cultivars of *Camellia sinensis*, the essential factor that distinguishes one kind of tea from another will always be the way in which the leaves are processed. Anyone who knows anything about tea knows that, yet it is surprising how little information is generally available about the ways in which different kinds of tea are processed in different countries. Korean tea is particularly easy to explore because it is grown in a very restricted area and made by only a small number of people. In Korea, too, there are a variety of processing techniques, resulting in a variety of teas.

The finest tea in Korea is entirely hand-processed. Perhaps that explains why there is so little of it, too little to be exported in commercial quantities. If you are visiting tea-growing regions, you will seek in vain for the room full of machines that so many Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese tea-producers seem to take for granted. The most industry you will find in the tea-producing houses along the slopes of Hwagye Valley and the other tea-making areas

of Mount Jiri is a row of gas rings under some iron cauldrons and a few rush mats for rolling the tea on.

At first, it seems that all Korean tea is roughly similar in taste, even when it is processed using a machine in a factory. Yet there is a variety of processes, and of course the best tea is always handmade, even in factories.

Nothing is more challenging than to make tea by hand. Much of the finest tea is made by devoted lay persons and Buddhist monks, who regard the task as a spiritual discipline requiring great concentration. Certainly, no one can expect to earn money or fame by tea-making; it can only be done as a labor of love, as a service to those who practice the Way of Tea. Some people begin each day's tea-making with prayers, meditation and the reading of scriptures. The modern tea revival began largely among monks, who made tea for their personal use, with leaves from the bushes growing wild around their temples. Ideally, perhaps, the person making the tea should also pick the leaves but this is not usually possible.



It is slow, wearisome work when the tea bushes are growing in irregular clusters up steep, rough slopes. The leaves must come from bushes that are located well away from any road, for tea readily absorbs the smell of exhaust fumes. Likewise, those making tea must not use any perfumed soap or cosmetics for the same reason. Externally and inwardly, there must be real cleanliness, simplicity of mind, and devotion of heart.

Korean tea is often classified according to the date at which the leaves were picked, as in the “first flush” system used since ancient times in China. Superimposed on the Korean lunar calendar are twenty-four seasonal dates based on the movement of the sun, which were borrowed from Chinese tradition. The day known as “Kok-u” normally falls on April 20th. The tea gathered before this date is known as “Ujeon” and commands the highest price. The next seasonal date, “Ipha”, falls on May 5th or 6th, and tea gathered between those two dates is known as “Sejak”. Tea gathered after *Ipha* is known as “Jung-jak”. It should be added that the Korean weather is colder than that in China, with the result that Korean tea-makers, although they pay lip-service to the traditional dates, actually go on making “Ujeon” from the first growth of shoots beyond April 20th, when sometimes there are almost no shoots on the tea bushes.

The leaves have to be carefully selected, especially when making the finest tea by hand. It is a little like wine-making, for certain patches of ground yield leaves that are particularly fragrant while other parts of the same valley or hill are incapable of producing tea of that quality. Some plantation owners apply liberal doses of fertilizer, which encourages the rapid growth of insipid leaves; obviously, there must be no trace of insecticide on the fresh buds used for making tea, but in some plantations even that is not guaranteed! People making tea need to check very carefully where the leaves they use have been picked from, if they do not pick their own.



Here are the different processes involved in making Korean teas:

Pucho-cha

There are two main methods of hand-processing in use in Korea when making the best green tea. One way of processing results in what is known as “Pucho-cha” and is by far the most common. This involves repeated transfers of the leaves to and from the cauldron, in alternating stages of heating and rolling, up to nine times. About three kilograms of fresh leaves are processed at a time.

The processing is begun in a thick iron or steel cauldron, which is traditionally heated by a wood fire —although nowadays a gas ring is often used, since that allows easier control of the temperature. The cauldron is first heated to about 350 degrees Celsius then the fresh leaves are tipped in. The leaves may emit a slight hissing crackle as they touch the hot metal. They must be tossed gently and stirred constantly to prevent any burning. This softens them; then once they have absorbed the heat,

they can be briefly compressed and rolled together to encourage the evaporation of their moisture. Often two or more people work together to keep the leaves turning, hunched over the hot cauldron in what is a truly back-breaking task.

Rolling

After an initial 10 minutes or so of softening and heating over the fire, the leaves are removed from the heat to be rubbed and rolled vigorously by the palms of the hands on a firm, flat surface—often a rough straw mat or basket, so that they curl tightly on themselves. This encourages the development of an intense taste but if too much violence is used the leaves will tear and break and the quality of the tea will suffer. Speed and strength are both essential here.

Separating

The next step is the most delicate and time-consuming. The emerging juices make the rolled leaves stick tightly together, and they have to be shaken apart one by one in order that their moisture can evaporate freely. Without this, the tea cannot dry properly,



and the final result will be clumped in unsightly knots, but if too much force is used, the leaves will tear and break.

Throughout the entire drying process, older leaves, twigs and harder stalks must continually be removed as they are noticed. The partially dried leaves may next be spread in a thin layer on paper laid on trays and left exposed to the air while other batches of fresh leaves are processed.

By the end of the first cycle of frying and rolling, the leaves have already diminished considerably in volume. They are now put back in the cauldron, which is rather cooler than for the first frying, though still quite hot. Again they are turned, pressed, rolled gently as the process continues. Then the hot leaves are once again removed from the cauldron, rubbed and rolled together on a hard surface, and shaken apart.

Once again, they are given a short time to go on drying in the air. Then the same process is repeated, several times, until they are virtually dry. The period over the heat is shorter each time, and the heat is gradually reduced.

Final Drying

The leaves are then spread out thinly and allowed to go on drying on sheets of clean paper spread on the heated floor of an indoor room for at least 4-5 hours, often overnight. The next morning they are returned to the cauldron, that is now only lightly heated, and kept turning gently, all the time being stirred and pressed until the leaves are completely dry. This is the decisive final process, known in Korean as “mat-naegi” or “hyang-olligi” (taste-giving or fragrance-enhancing), lasting some two hours. As the final drying progresses, the leaves emit a pale cloud of intense fragrance. By the end, their color has changed from bright green to gray.

Once the tea is completely dry, it is given time to cool before being packed. This is important, since tea that is too quickly sealed may retain a taste of roasting that can spoil it.

Korean tea is not usually vacuum packed, but is sealed in foil bags containing 30 or 50 grams in the case of “ujeon” (first flush) and 50 or 100 grams for other grades. The most important thing is to prevent any contact with moisture. The tea should be stored in a cool place and once a pack is opened, it should be used up fairly quickly, especially in the case of *ujeon*, which can easily lose its delicate taste once exposed to the air.



Chung-cha

For the tea processed as “Chung-cha”, represented most notably by the Venerable Hyodang’s Panyaro tea, the fresh leaves are plunged for a moment into nearly boiling water to soften them, then allowed to drain on straw mats for a couple of hours, before being placed over the fire.

Once in the cauldron over the fire, they remain there and the entire process of rubbing and rolling, separating and stirring is done by two or three people bent over the cauldron. This process takes more than two hours for a single batch of about 3 kilograms of leaves. There is no further processing over the fire, but an equivalent prolonged

period in which the tea lies spread thinly on the well-heated floor of a Korean *ondol* floor has the same effect of enhancing and deepening the taste.

One characteristic of the tea made by this method is its depth and subtlety, which can be developed by using relatively cool water for the first brewing and allowing the water for the initial brew to remain on the leaves for a longer duration. If the tea has been well made, the resulting intensity of taste is quite overwhelming. Sometimes it is mistakenly said that all Korean tea should be prepared in this way, whereas in fact normal Korean green tea should be made with hot (though not boiling) water.



Paryo-cha

In the last few years, more and more Korean tea makers have been producing what they term “paryo-cha”, which is the Korean term for “oxidized tea” even though “paryo” really means “fermented,” which the tea is not. There are probably several reasons for this shift. One is that most of us do not always want to be drinking green tea, as it can be slightly acidic and “cool” according to traditional Asian medicine. As a result, we have turned to Chinese Oolong and Puerh for variety. It is also true that the work involved in drying green tea, described above, is backbreaking while *paryo-cha* virtually takes care of itself most of the time. In addition, it is probably easier to produce an agreeable oxidized tea if you do not have access to really good leaves or processing techniques. The taste of these teas is usually sweet and fruity, they are warming where green tea is cooling, and in some cases reminds you of Taiwan’s “Oriental Beauty” or similarly oxidized teas.

A fellow Korean tea lover named Matt describes the process on his [blog](#) in the following way: “the tea is gathered then dried in the sun for four to eight hours. After which it is violently hand rolled on a fibrous rush mat that causes the leaves to break

and tear, exposing their enzymes to the oxygen of the clean mountain air. They are left to oxidize in the shade for forty-eight hours. The leaves take in the mountain air deeply. Next they are spread out on the floor of a hot room with an *ondol* (traditional Korean floor heating) at 35-40 degrees centigrade until they are dry. The leaves are then hand crushed and the dust is sifted out the traditional way using an old, traditional sifter before being packaged.”

What should be added is that the dried leaves are often stored loose in unsealed crocks for several months before being sold or drunk, allowing an ageing process to increase the quality by further enhancing the oxidation. The process is a simple one, and the Korean oxidized teas are not much like any of the standard Chinese Oolongs or red teas.



Ttok-cha

“Ttok” (or *ddok*) is the Korean term for any kind of rice-cake, whether the white stick of well-pounded rice paste broiled in peppery sauce, as “ttok-bbokki”, or sliced into broth to make “ttok-guk”, or the multiple sweet varieties that correspond to western cakes. “Ttok-cha” is so named because it is a caked tea resulting from a similar process of pounding and shaping. It is an ancient tradition that has recently been revived and I confess that I have never drunk it, as it is quite hard to find.

In a report posted to the [ChaDao blog](#) in August 2008, Steve Owyong explains (quoting me at times): “To make *ttok* tea, fresh leaves were picked

and selected, and then the leaves were steamed in an earthenware steamer. The cooked leaves were pounded to a pulpy mass, the pulp formed into little cakes, some as small as the size of a coin. To dry and store, cakes were pierced and strung together on a cord, like a string of copper cash.” This is why one traditional name for this tea is “엽전차” (Yöpjön-ch’a or cash tea)



The varieties of Korean tea are all worth exploring, though they are sometimes neglected in international tea communities. Being produced by hand in traditional ways, and with a sense of spiritual presence often means that they stand out from the larger bulk of mostly commercial teas, helping lead the drinker inward to the mountain stillness that is their true source.



The Leaf



원쪽 세계 각지에서 모은 다기들이 공간을 은은한 향기로 메운다. 꽃 향기는 멀리까지 풍기고 그 빛깔은 더욱 맑으니 군자의 덕행이 먼 곳까지 미치는 것과 같다. 부채 뒤 글씨가 향기롭다. 오른쪽 본시 주동객서(主東客西)라지만 이날은 화춘 선생이 서쪽에 손님처럼 앉아 왔다. 이곳을 찾는 벗들은 모두 차를 매개로 만난 사이. 즐겁게 담소하는 동안 흔탁한 세상사 시름이 차물에 씻겨 나가는 것만 같다.