

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

We get emailed a lot of questions, and thought it might be useful to start publicly answering some of the ones that are asked more frequently, to help others in their tea journey.

This issue we thought we'd address some of the questions we've received about kettles, silver *ginbin* and iron *tetsubin* in particular. Over the years, we have received dozens of questions emailed to *The Leaf* concerning them. The following questions are paraphrased from several examples asking the same thing. Each question was asked at least a few times by different people, only phrased differently. We hope these answers are helpful. Keep sending us questions and we'll pool some others by topic in upcoming issues!

Could you state simply what influence silver and iron kettles have on water?

Silver kettles purify water. They make the Qi of the water light, rising up. The water prepared in a silver kettle is also sweet, with a long finish. This purity is gentle on tea—caressing flavors out of sensitive teas. For this reason, silver kettles are quite nice when paired with newborn sheng Puerh, green, white or light oolongs. The sweetness adds to the tea, and the purity and lightness not only cooperate with, but encourage these properties in the tea. The purity and light Yin Qi is uplifting, especially when the weather is warm.

Tetsubin are earthy, heavy and rich. Antique *tetsubin* are especially porous, absorbing minerals from the water and leaching them out again over time. *Tetsubin* add flavor, depth and penetration to water. The water in them is somehow hotter, and gets deeper into the leaves. For these reasons, *tetsubin* are especially nice when used with darker teas like aged Puerh, roasted or aged oolongs, red or black teas. Aged teas have especially crumpled cells, and the added heat and penetration therefore brings out more of the essence from the leaf. Also, since the *tetsubin* adds flavor these teas just seem all the richer, more full-bodied and complex when a *tetsubin* is used. The Qi is grounding, often Yang. It helps center a restless soul.

What are the five elements (*wushing*) and why do you discuss them with regards to tea?

The traditional five elements of Chinese philosophy are: Wood, Water, Fire, Earth and Metal. They are just a way of looking at aspects of this world—a conceptual system. Tea is an art, and as such the real skill is in the hand, and in the heart. As they say, “the path from the mind to the hand flows through the heart.” In fact, that is the meaning of Gong Fu tea: that the mastery is in the heart and hand, not the mind. You can’t think your way to better tea. It isn’t a scholarly vocation. An encyclopedia of words about a tea would tell you less than drinking a single cup of it.

And yet, we have to teach others how to prepare tea. The idea is that the methodology itself can easily be abandoned later. It isn’t important anyway. As mentioned, you’ve got to infuse your heart in tea—steeped body and soul.

Over many years, we’ve found that using the five elements (*wushing*) is a very skillful way of learning about tea. For one, it is more poetic. It speaks more to the heart than the mind. While it is possible to learn from a scientific approach, for example, measuring “amount, temperature and steep time” this is a bit like painting by





numbers, and is ultimately a much steeper road to mastery. That such a way of looking at things is non-scientific, irrational nonsense is perhaps the very point. Isn't all art that way? The mind comes to rely too much on concepts, rather than the senses—most important of which is the heart—and in focusing on one of them too much, attention is taken from other, equally important areas. Focused on temperature, for example, you may miss the strength of flow from the kettle, subtle changes in Qi when your arm is at different angles, etc. A focused, concentrated mind, a conceptual thinking, reasoning mind won't make the best tea. The best tea comes from a more open, aware and still mind—a mind absorbing all the variables at the same time (or no time). Such mastery is difficult, so it's better to choose a system of learning that inspires you poetically, and which can later be abandoned easily.

Furthermore, the tea space is a place where words like “cinnabar”, “alchemy” and “clouds & mist” all begin to make sense in a way that seems silly to those who don't have a romance for tea. Using the elements to learn takes us back to ancient monasteries, alchemical laboratories and other such poetic landscapes—all conducive to the transformation of self, which is the real goal of any journey, tea or otherwise.

Finally, there is a very palpable difference in a tea session that combines all the elements: wood as tea, water, fire as charcoal, earth as pots and metal as kettle. And if you study them, you'll see that they each have all the others within them: tea has water, earth, temperature, etc., for example; and they can be organized, taught, learned and practiced in different orders, cycles and ways.

With all five elements, everything comes together in a different way, and you can feel the difference, indeed. Give it a try!

If silver can't be heated on charcoal doesn't it defeat the purpose of having all five elements?

For a long time we also faced this challenge: on the one hand charcoal is so much better than any other kind of heat, but we also love silver. A few years back, we discovered some clay disks made in Guang Zhou that allow you to use silver on charcoal, *tetsubin* on a gas range, etc. by dissipating heat. They were and are our savior. They can be found cheaply all over China and Taiwan.

What are “singers”?

Some silver *ginbins* have hollow rings in the center of the bottom, usually with a motif carved in the openings at the top. The hollow disk has openings on the sides and carved holes designed in the top. When the water boils, it flows through these holes and makes a pleasant, “singing” sound—it often sounds like monks chanting in the distance.

How did the ancients then heat silver *ginbin* if not on charcoal?

They had stoves. They look a bit like a big, upside-down tophat. They are tall cylinders with a square, flat top and a removable iron disc in the center. The bottom of the cylinder then had an elliptical opening to place the charcoal in. The charcoal heats up the flat iron disk at the top of the flue and the *ginbin* was placed on this to heat. However, such stoves are quite expensive antiques these days.

Some Japanese tea masters also used tall, clay braziers called “ryo”. These small cylinders cannot withstand very high temperatures or they will crack. For that reason, small pieces of charcoal (or olive-pit charcoal in more modern times) are put only at the bottom. Since the *ginbin* is several inches above the coal, there is no danger of damaging it. Though this method heats water slowly, it isn’t a problem when brewing lighter green teas, as they were.

Do antique *tetsubin* really make better water than the modern ones? What’s the difference?

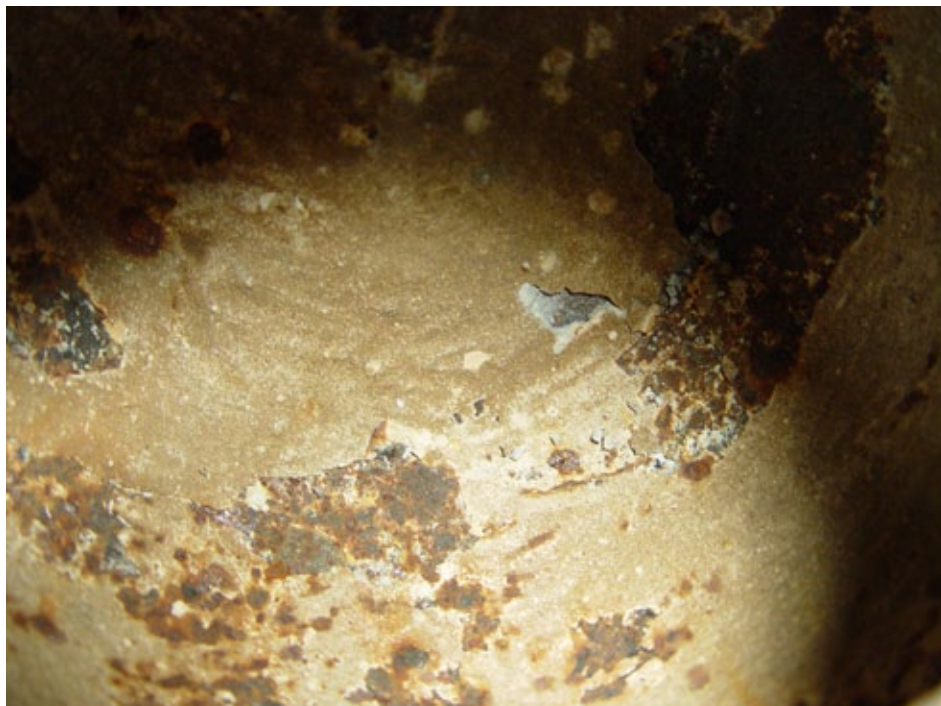
Some of the differences between antique and modern *tetsubin* are indescribable. However, the traditional “pig iron” may have been more porous. Also, they used sand molds that could only be used once, whereas modern artists reuse wax ones. Also, many modern factories cover the inside of their *tetsubins* with a protective lacquer that prevents rusting but also closes pores and prevents breathing.

Tetsubin are like Yixing: they build up over time. If an antique *tetsubin* had good mountain water boiling in it day in and day out for many years, then it will make better, deeper water.

Finally, as with all things, they just don’t make things as well as they used to. It is not that the craftsmen of yesteryear—in any trade—were godlike saints. But they were simpler people: they ate organic, homegrown food, etc. And they started learning their craft at a very early age, never studying anything else. This simplicity of life and complete devotion to a craft produced higher-quality products, from a steadier hand. The modern artist is often stressed by modern life, has a complicated mind with complicated desires and is full of other knowledge besides his trade. Obviously, there are exceptions both ways: poor craftsman back in the day, and incredible ones nowadays; but this is a noticeable trend.

Ultimately, you have to try both kettles to know the difference, but it’s there for sure.





What is “fur”?

Antique *tetsubin* are incredibly porous. They absorb minerals, which build up on the inside. This build-up is often called “rabbit’s fur”, because it is white or cream colored and resembles fur. If the water that caused the build-up was good mountain water, full of Qi, then these minerals will influence the water, making it deeper, sweeter and more full-bodied. If the kettle goes unused for some time, however, the fur can turn orange or brown and should then maybe be scoured. You will have to give it a try first.

Antique *tetsubin* and *ginbin* are expensive. How does that concord with the *wabi* aesthetic of tea? Aren’t they an extravagance?

This question is based on a mistaken assumption: that *wabi* has anything to do with price. “*Wabi*” originally meant “lonely, withered, cold” but was later adapted to Zen arts in a less pejorative way. It then came to mean that which is imperfect, simple and natural. It is a heartfelt appreciation of simplicity, and natural, unconstrained, spontaneous patterns. *Wabi* does not mean cheap.

Of course, back in the day simple things were often cheap. Many *tetsubin* were made for ordinary people, and sat boiling all day in the kitchen. Today, however, these values are a bit topsy-turvy. Finding simple, handmade crafts is difficult and more expensive, just like it costs more to eat a simple, organic diet—while a complex, processed diet of manmade junk food is cheapest. Living on the 14th floor of an empty apartment with plastic tubing in the walls, and linoleum floors, eating fried, processed food from plastic plates, drinking tea out of Styrofoam cups may be a cheap way to go, but it isn’t *wabi*. It is, in fact, much more complicated, considering the confusion involved in such a lifestyle and tea session.

It could be argued that silver *ginbin* are indeed extravagant, and have always been. But many *tetsubin* are the paragon of *wabi*, with “insect bites”, willow branches and other simple designs.

Whether or not something is *wabi*—simple—has nothing to do with its price. The quality of simplicity is either inherent in the object or not, and what people choose to sell it for doesn’t influence this quality. Many antiques have been bought and sold hundreds of times in their lifetime, often for very different prices. The fact is that many such things are priceless, and the market value is relatively arbitrary.

Wabi is a feeling, an aesthetic movement from the heart. It need not be expensive, nor cheap. *Wabi* can be using something free, like plucking a branch for a spout-cleaner or a simple antique *tetsubin*, which may cost a small fortune.

How do I choose a *tetsubin*?

We get this question a lot. We cannot recommend any online vendor, if that is what is meant by it. We don't support or promote any particular vendors. Wu De was helping people source some *tetsubin* for commission a year or so ago, but has since ceased doing this as he is now teaching and cannot be affiliated with any tea or teaware sales.

It is important to remember, however, that antique *tetsubin* are all one-of-a-kind pieces. Not only is the iron composition in every one different—due to slight variations in ore and temperature—but the water that was put in them over the years is different. Was good water used in it? Is the mineral build-up a good one? How rusted is it? How skilled are you at scouring them? How well do you trust the vendor? These are all valuable questions. Since every *tetsubin* is different it is important to taste the water before buying. There are many shops in Asia selling them, so tasting a few—if possible—is the best way. Look for one that has a design you like and also makes good water.

Some *tetsubin* are poorly stored and show signs of disuse. Some of these can be scoured, but the process isn't easy to do and takes some time.

Also, part of the identification process of *tetsubin* is in the lid, which was often made of copper and/or bronze, and sometimes by a different craftsman. The problem with this is that orphaned lids can be used to make legitimately old kettles appear to be worth more: if a famous craftsman signed a lid, for example. These lids can also be put on newer *tetsubin* to fake old ones. For these reasons, some guidance and trust is needed when buying a *tetsubin*.

How do I choose a pure silver *ginbin*?

A silver *ginbin* is easier to buy than a *tetsubin*. As long as it is pure silver from Iwami prefecture the quality is very consistent. The weight, design and provenance are all factors in the price, as well as the box, which often identifies the brand and/or craftsman. Silver is also a lot easier to clean if it is tarnished. Look for the “pure silver” stamp on the bottom.

-The Leaf-



