

What Is Pu-Erh Tea?

What type of tea is Pu-erh?

One unique type of Chinese tea is a black-green hybrid called pu-erh. Tea experts classify pu-erh tea as a green as well as a post-fermented tea because of its aging process. The main characteristics of pu-erh tea are the dark red drink it produces and its soothing mellow flavor. This is a result of an aging process that produces free radicals and microorganisms that oxidize the leaves.

The pu-erh leaves come from the wide-leaf variety of the *Camellia sinensis* plant which are compressed into tea cakes or bricks and are wrapped for packaging. The bricks are then stored away from moisture, heat or sunlight to encourage the aging process. Many believe that this process for pressing Chinese pu-erh began hundreds of years ago when tea makers in the Yunnan province began pressing tea to aid in both storage and horseback transport. Tea merchants and drinkers may have accidentally discovered the positive effects of aging as tea sat for long periods of time in storerooms following lengthy journeys to trade.

The Benefits Of Pu-Erh Tea

What are the health benefits of Pu-erh?

The benefits of pu-erh tea are similar to all other green teas. Studies have shown that drinking green tea, including pu-erh, helps lower LDL cholesterol, which is the bad type of cholesterol. Also, pu-erh tea has antimutagenic and antimicrobial properties that help prevent tooth decay. Some experts also believe that drinking pu-erh tea may also lower your risk for cancer, rheumatoid arthritis and cardiovascular disease. In addition, pu-erh tea strengthens your immune system to fight off infection.

Pu-erh contains the antioxidant epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), too. Antioxidants repair the damage done by and deactivate the molecules called free radicals, which are produced as a byproduct when body tissue consumes oxygen. Oxidative stress can lead to strokes, neurodegenerative diseases, some cancers and coronary heart disease. By consuming green tea with its powerful antioxidant EGCG, you strengthen your body against all those health problems, and more.

Some even swear by Chinese pu-erh tea as a hangover cure that soothes upset stomachs.

How Pu-Erh Tea Is Made

How is pu-erh shaped?

Pu-erh tea, no matter the shape, is made from maocha, a green tea from the large-leaf variety of the *Camellia sinensis* plant most commonly found in the Yunnan province.

Maocha can be processed or seasoned for several months in order to hasten the aging process prior to being compressed. This produces ripened pu-erh, sometimes known as cooked pu-erh. Unprocessed pu-erh—that is, leaves that are directly pressed without aging—is referred to as raw pu-erh.

After pressing, both the raw and processed pu-erh teas go through the oxidization and fermentation process while they are stored. This is due to the free radicals and microorganisms living in the tea.

After this fermentation process and oxidation, pu-erh tea is steamed and pressed either with a hydraulic press, a lever press or by a stone press. The pressed pu-erh is then air-dried in a process that could take several months before being packaged and sold.

The Taste Of Pu-Erh

How does pu-erh tea differ from other teas in taste?

Naturally made pu-erh tea requires an extremely long and involved process that often takes decades. So, is pu-erh worth the effort?

Tea enthusiasts certainly seem to think so. Pu-erh lacks the bitter tannins of other green or post-fermented teas. It is smoother and gentler on the tongue and throat and is less acidic. Pu-erh also tastes richer, with earthy or organic undertones.

Though all pu-erh teas share the same pleasant drinking quality, there are many different varieties of pu-erh. This is because the specific climate of the area where the leaves were harvested determines the taste of the tea. Even the kinds of trees growing near the tea plants will affect the taste of the tea.

Also, green pu-erh, which is naturally fermented over many years, has a much different taste than the mass-produced pu-erh which is artificially fermented by manual processes. In fact, each cup of naturally-aged pu-erh tea can vary in taste as the fermentation time, humidity, light and temperature conditions all affect the end flavor.

The History Of Pu-Erh Tea

Do people collect pu-erh?

The history of pu-erh began long ago, and like the tea itself, it has gotten richer with age. Experts believe that people first began making and brewing pu-erh tea during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 AD), while some historians contend it may have even been made much earlier during the Shang Dynasty (1766 BC to 1122 BC). During that time, everything was done by hand, and the tea was so valued it could even be used for currency.

Most pu-erh tea originates from the Chinese Yunnan province, specifically in Xishuangbanna area and its “Six Famous Mountains.” The climate in this area is uniquely conducive for tea growing.

Tea enthusiasts speak with a passion for pu-erh tea that rivals any foodie or wine connoisseur. Many people collect and store pu-erh tea into private stashes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Pu-erh tea has even been known to show up in a bride’s dowry!

Shapes Of Pu-Erh

What shapes does Pu-erh come in?

The shapes of pu-erh are almost as varied as the tastes of pu-erh. A “bing” is a round and flat disk consisting of between 100 grams to 5 kilograms of pu-erh tea. Amounts of 375 grams, 400 grams and 500 grams are the most common. A toucha bowl or a nest is shaped like a bird’s nest. Toucha bowls range in size from 3 grams to 3 kilograms, with 100 grams, 250 grams and 500 grams being the most popular. Touchas often have holes in the center for easy mobility.

Bricks are usually bigger, ranging in size from 100 grams to 1,000 grams, with 250 grams and 500 grams the most popular. Bricks are both the easiest to store and the easiest to transport. Squares often feature decorative words pressed into the center.

Mushrooms are usually produced for Tibet tea drinkers, and come in sizes between 250 grams and 300 grams. Historically, the ribbed melon or gold melon shape was created as a tribute tea made for the Qing Dynasty Emperors. Finally, some pu-erh tea isn’t pressed into a shape at all, and instead is left as loose-leaf tea.

Creating The Natural Taste Of Pu-Erh Tea

Where does Pu-erh come from?

Pu-erh tea is grown under very specific conditions to produce the finest leaves for tea. The average temperature for the growth of the *Camellia sinensis* plants that produce pu-erh tea is between 17 and 22 degrees Celsius or 62 and 71 degrees Fahrenheit. The plants, which grow in the southern Yunnan area of China, specifically in Xishuangbanna and the “Six Famous Mountains,” see an average of 1,200 to 1,800 mm of rainfall a year. These factors, plus the intensity and duration of illumination which produces chlorophyll, xanthophylls and carotenoid, all work together to produce the starting leaf product for the process of Chinese pu-erh tea.

These natural elements working on the tea leaves vary the taste from any other tea leaves and sets pu-erh apart as a fine, smooth, rich and organic tasting tea. These

earthy flavors are the base of a tea that has remained popular for thousands of years, and continues to be cherished as a favorite.

How To Brew Pu-Erh Tea

How much Pu-erh tea brews one pot?

Tea experts take care when brewing pu-erh tea, especially if the fermented tea has had a lengthy aging process. They also take the same consideration when storing pu-erh tea, keeping it in a dry place in the wrapper until they are ready to enjoy it.

Unless otherwise noted, one common brick or disk of tea is around 300 grams or one tablespoon. One tablespoon makes one pot of tea, so if you are just making one cup, pinch off a small bit of the tea to use. First, moisten your Chinese pu-erh tea with a small bit of water for thirty seconds. Then discard this water because it will be strong and have a more bitter taste than the tea typically houses. Put the tea in the pot of boiling water and let it steep for three to five minutes. Then, strain the pu-erh tea leaves out with a strainer. Serve hot and enjoy!

Choosing A Good Pu-Erh Tea

What should Pu-erh smell like?

Choosing a good pu-erh tea is important because the range of tastes and varieties of the tea are so vast. In addition, you want to make sure to get tea you enjoy because Chinese pu-erh tea tends to be expensive because the process to make it is so time-intensive and involved. To make sure you are buying top quality tea, follow these simple steps:

1. First, smell the tea. It should not smell like anything but earthy, woody tea; although it may contain a few smoky undertones depending on the age. Tea absorbs smells, so if it was improperly wrapped or stored, it might have picked up some cooking or spice smells. If it was handled improperly, it also could have become moldy and will smell as such. Leave that pu-erh behind.
2. If you are getting raw pu-erh, the color should look dark green. If you are purchasing an aged pu-erh, it should look dark red. If your tea looks pure black, or has white or yellow dots, leave it on the shelf. Those are signs of mold or yeast forming.
3. Get a taste. Much like wine, developing a taste for pu-erh is a long process. It takes time and effort to taste the complex flavors.

The Future Of Pu-Erh Tea

What are more benefits of Pu-erh?

The future of Chinese pu-erh tea seems just as rich as its history. First, while there is already a significant amount of medical research showing the health benefits of drinking pu-erh tea, researchers continue to investigate. So far, they have found evidence to suggest pu-erh tea helps lower cholesterol, reduce the risk of cancers, boost metabolism and the immune system, and heal the body with the antioxidant EGCG. It also has been shown to fight gum disease and help prevent neurological disorders like Alzheimer's disease. Who knows what benefit they will discover next?

Most recently, economic gains within China's middle class has fueled an increasing demand for pu-erh tea, owing to the fact that pu-erh is a form of status symbol. The recent rise in demand has put pressure on pu-erh tea factories to create faster and more efficient means of manufacturing pu-erh tea without detracting from the quality for which it is prized. Expect the Pu-erh tea to become more and more popular as it moves through the Chinese middle class and into western popularity.