

Passionate about Pu-erh

ABUNDANT QUANTITIES AND REASONABLE PRICES
COMBINE WITH A FASCINATING STORY TO MAKE THIS
PRIZED TEA A PRACTICAL AND PROFITABLE OFFERING.

BY DAN BOLTON



RISHI FOUNDER AND TEA
BUYER JOSHUA KAISER WITH
CHINESE GROWER MR. WANG.

Tea and coffee are different pathways to the same destination

— GARTH JANSSEN



PREPARING PU-ERH

BASICS

Start with four to seven grams of loose tea; break 5-grams from the teacake or use a 5-gram mini tuo cha to make 16 ounces of hot tea. Water temperature should be 190-205 degrees. Infusions begin at 1.5 minutes and increase to 5 to 7 minutes. Pu-erh yields 5 to 8 infusions.

PU-ERH TO GO

Pu-erh is a great value since five grams yields several refills, each cup better than the last. Baristas who appreciate tea and promote it often encounter customers who simply don't have much time or patience. Instead of dismissing a great business opportunity, try the following: Put one and

a half tablespoons of loose tea in a No. 2 t-sac. Draw 16 ounces of filtered 190-degree water into a takeaway cup. Suggest they steep the tea for several minutes until it becomes red amber (it will not turn bitter). Tell them to just add more hot water whenever the cup is a quarter full. Suggest they double the immersion time with each refill.

Elapsed time: two minutes.

Kunming NanXiang Tea Co., Ltd., which produces 1,500 tons of the tea, long ago secured access to medicinal quality pu-erh.

France is the largest non-Asian consumer and Korea has developed a taste for pu-erh, but America's steady up tick suggests it will be the next major market, says Kaiser.

A dozen tea companies, including PeLi teas, ITI, TeaSource, SpecialTeas, Revolution Tea, Adagio, Harney & Sons, The Republic of Tea, Mighty Leaf and two leaves and a bud, sell pu-erh, but few are as deeply passionate as Kaiser and Rahim.

Numi has a big investment in pu-erh, launching an organic packaged-goods line in January followed by the March introduction of glass-bottled organic RTD pu-erh tea blends. Using organic real ingredients like mango and peach purees without flavorings and extracts, the RTD line is being marketed as functional beverages with 32 percent more antioxidants than green tea. Flavors include Moroccan Mint, Magnolia Jasmine and Earl Grey, as well as peach and mango that retail for \$2.49

Rishi offers several organic, fair-trade, loose pu-erh and pu-erh blends and traditional Tuo Cha, which is a small, individually wrapped five-gram compressed teacake used in making multiple 8-ounce infusions.

COFFEEHOUSE OPPORTUNITY

"If you look at where the coffee market was even 10 to 15 years ago the 50-cent bottomless cup prevailed," says Kaiser. "Today customers order by origin and roast. This is a reflection of a more sophisticated palate."



THREE POT CHOP CHOP

Fill a 10-ounce guywan just under a quarter full with loose pu-erh (between four and seven grams). Rinse the leaves with hot water and immediately decant into a waste sink. Fill again with 190-degree water and after 45 seconds, pour the first infusion into a 20-ounce teapot. The pot will be about one-third full. Repeat, mixing the second infusion into the same teapot. Let the third infusion steep longer, about two minutes to achieve a great cup of pu-erh with traditional flavor, strength and mouth-feel.

Elapsed time: five minutes.

Mysterious and fabled, pu-erh is the ancient trader's tea of China now making its way into America's coffee shops.

Pressed into dense, distinctively shaped teacakes for transport by caravan and possessing documented health attributes, "pu-erh was a sleeping secret for hundreds of years," says Numi Tea co-founder and CEO Ahmed Rahim.

Created to withstand the rigors of travel, pu-erh is rich in antioxidants, improves with age and has a shelf life longer than 30 years. It withstands rigorous boiling, contains moderate amounts of caffeine and will not grow bitter no matter how long it is steeped. Five grams makes several 16-ounce pots. These additional infusions bring the cost down to 7 cents per serving. Because it loses so little of its potency with each refill, pu-erh is a great value at \$2 for a 12-ounce bottomless cup.

Pu-erh (pronounced *poo-h-AIR*) is harvested from the original arbor cultivar of *Camilla Sinensis*, tall trees with thick dark-green leaves that measure eight inches by four. These broad-leaf teas thrive high in the mountains of Yunnan, a province at the southernmost border of China that touches Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar (Burma). Trees continue to produce in forest tea gardens planted 1,500 years ago. Wild trees live to 1,800 years and the oldest, found in Zhenyuan, is 2,700 years of age, stands 84 feet high and has a diameter of nine feet according to the "Guinness Book of World Records."

Collectors and connoisseurs revere its place in antiquity and Asian medical practitioners praise pu-erh's therapeutic qualities as much as its rich red-amber color and complex, elemental, earthy flavor of peat with the aroma of a fall walk in the forest.

Known for thousands of years, but traded largely within China, the tea recently experienced a surge in popularity. Driven by its documented health benefits, speculators superheated sales in the late 1990s. The run-up began in 1970 when the Taiwan government funded efforts leading citizens to embrace tea, revitalizing tea culture on the island and energizing trade in Hong Kong's tea markets. Pu-erh annually appreciated 10 percent starting in 1996 and was viewed as an investment. As middle-class Chinese entered the market, aged pu-erh became

scarce. By 2006 heated auctions for collectible teacakes drove prices well above that of gold. Commercial tea that sold for 3 yuan (43 cents a pound) rocketed to \$380. Traders borrowed heavily to stock their warehouses, convinced that ageless pu-erh would continue to appreciate in value. (See: *Tribute Tea* at www.specialty-coffee.com).

In formerly impoverished regions like Ban Zhang and Yiwu, tribal growers built modern homes and teenage tea pickers paid cash for expensive motor bikes.

Today pickers once again walk narrow trails to work because they cannot afford a liter of gasoline. All but 500 of the region's 3,000 pu-erh traders are bankrupt and the newly constructed six-story trade and tea-bundling facility in Menghai stands largely vacant and forlorn.

REASONABLE PRICES ENCOURAGE EXPORT

Now that the bubble has burst, wholesale prices are a reasonable \$20 to \$30 per pound. A pound yields 90 five-gram servings, each sufficient to make eight 12-ounce cups of tea. Yunnan produced an astounding 80,000 tons of pu-erh in 2007, much of it low quality and some counterfeit. (See: *Detecting Counterfeit Pu-erh* at www.specialty-coffee.com).

"In 2008, mid-crash, Yunnan produced less than half that quantity," says Rishi Tea Company Founder Joshua Kaiser. "This year, we expect to see 50 percent less than in 2008 due to poor market demand and dry weather conditions," says Kaiser, who first began importing pu-erh in 1999. To ensure authenticity of origin, vintage of harvest, and to improve the hygienic quality of pu-erh, in 2002 Rishi began dealing directly with growers and by 2003 had become a major producer of organic and fair trade tea in Jingmai. In 2006 the firm shifted its operation to the ancient-growth tea forests on Hekai Tea Mountain.

Ahmed Rahim, who with his sister Reem, founded Oakland, Calif.-based Numi in 1999 is also harvesting and processing in China. The Americans follow in the footsteps of Hong Kong and Taiwan-based tea companies that manage much of the 32,000 acres of old-growth forest in the "Six Famous Mountain" region of Yunnan. Established Chinese firms like Kunming





TRADITIONAL AND NEW FORMS SUCH AS READY-TO-DRINK PU-ERH ARE INVIGORATING THE MARKET.

"The marketing of coffee is really about transporting customers to a distinct place, a discussion that includes fair trade and organic," he says.

"Among all the teas, the processing of pu-erh, its exotic peoples and culture really transports to origin," says Kaiser. "Pu-erh has a message that resonates with the marketing speak of the coffee world."

Kate Habansky, owner of Port Coffeehouse in Bridgeport, Conn., began serving pu-erh two years ago when she opened her 850-square foot shop and reports "it's going great."

Consumer interest in pu-erh is broad and building. "We serve it as a straight tea and occasionally iced," says Habansky, who says Rishi's ginger pu-erh is popular with "practically everyone." The tea sells for \$2 for 12 ounces or \$2.65 for a 20-ounce cup. Nine of 10 people who try it reorder, "but the first time, it needs an explanation because it is nothing like green or black teas," she says. "It does well with people who like to experiment, customers looking for variety, not necessarily a coffee," adds Habansky. Her menu includes 12 teas.

WHY NOT SERVE TEA?

Many baristas view tea as a hassle. Steeped too long it becomes bitter; too short and it's weak. Water temperatures must be exact for different varieties. Yet tea is by far the most profitable beverage the shop can serve and customer demand is rising. Driven by its health benefits, tea sales tripled between 1990 and 2005 according to the Tea Association of the USA. Market researchers Packaged Facts forecast \$15 billion in sales by 2012 with \$5 billion of that spent on specialty teas.

Garth Janssen, owner of LostDogCoffee in Shepherdstown, W.Va., has been serving pu-erh since 1996. A traditional coffee bar in 1,100 square feet with seating for 25, Janssen views tea and coffee as "different pathways to the same destination." He serves coffees, smoothies and espresso drinks and has worked hard to promote tea, which accounts for 35 percent of sales at very favorable margins.

"We have a saying at LostDog: Tea teaches us to be patient," Janssen tells customers. "Americans are way too overworked, always behind, always in a hurry. I ask them to look introspectively at the ritual of the day and suggest they get up early, come in early and wait five to seven minutes as we brew. We provide incentives. There's good music and lots of reading material," says Janssen.

He trains the six-person staff to help people understand the social aspects of drinking tea. It's about contemplation, about being present in the moment, says Janssen, who believes a large part of the experience is "not necessarily a product or dose of caffeine but a moment of relaxation to focus and decide 'what I will do with this day.'"

His six pu-erh varieties "are the most popular tea by far. We serve it hot, make iced tea, as a \$4.50 Lattea and even steam pu-erh directly with dairy, soy or rice milk." One of most popular drinks is the \$7 UltraDawg, a blend of pu-erh, espresso, soy milk and honey "that will rock yer world."

INDESTRUCTIBLE

Brewing pu-erh is more like making campfire coffee than whisking matcha. Simply unwrap a mini tuo cha or place loose pu-erh in a porcelain guywan. Add 190-degree water to get a rich, dark, satisfying tea that will stand up to sugar and milk. Loose pu-erh is often blended with fruits, florals and spices, a marketing strategy to introduce new tea drinkers to the brew. Janssen shaves fresh ginger into the cup with a flare that pleases customers.

Since Americans like a big cup, Kaiser suggests baristas brew pu-erh with a small teapot and combine three infusions of the same leaves in a 16-ounce cup. Janssen brews the tea in two-, three- and four-cup Pyrex containers, adding tea to each through the day, always blending different steeps.

"We call the first steep 'Power,' the second

'Balance' and the third 'Water,' alluding to the Zen of tea," says Janssen. It is not necessary to remove the pu-erh and clean the pot between pours because with each infusion pu-erh gains complexity. (See: *Garth's Way* at www.specialty-coffee.com).

"Pu-erh is very stimulating and full-bodied with an invigorating character," says Kaiser. "Ripened Shu pu-erh has a strong, rich mouth feel. It lacks astringency so there is no need for milk and sugar."

Rahim says pu-erh makes a fine latte, rich and dark. "Start with 1-1/2 tablespoons of pu-erh, or our chocolate pu-erh in a clean head and make a double shot," he suggests. "Then add steamed milk and a little organic chocolate syrup. The mouth sensation is similar to coffee."

In Tibet, pu-erh is the base for yak butter tea, adds Kaiser. "They boil it with yak butter or milk," he explains. "It is the only tea in China with the body strength and color to stand up to such treatment but 'yak is not my palate,'" laughs Kaiser.

FOREFATHERS OF TEA

Sean O'Leary, a photojournalist employed by Rishi Tea to document the annual harvest and preparation of Pu-erh, says that he "absolutely fell in love with tea and tea culture. The people there really are the forefathers of tea."

Twenty-two ethnic groups including the Yi, Hani and Lahu minorities live on Mt. Jing Mai & Mang Jing and other peaks forming the Lancang River basin where the majority of ancient forests stand. Rishi's tea is harvested by the Manmai and Mannong Villages. Production is limited to 250,000 kilos. Kaiser says Rishi processes about 100,000 to 150,000 kg. Villagers, balancing large harvest baskets on their shoulders, sell most of their tea as fresh leaves to the local factories for processing. They also make tea by hand in their homes to sell to tourists and tea traders.

"They have the oldest tea culture and the oldest tea trees in the world," says O'Leary whose images illustrate this article. Rishi's partnership with the growers in Hekai,

one of the oldest tea cultivation areas in the world, is preferable because the area produces old arbor tea and with no monocultural bush plantations. "It's quite a treasure," says Kaiser.

Rishi has gone to great lengths to better the lives of these people, constructing sanitation, education and community facilities. The company has

sold Fair Trade Certified organic pu-erh since 2003, a certification that requires wages well above traditional pay.

PROCESSING PU-ERH

Tea leaves are plucked in the spring. Young, light-green leaves of the *Assamica* cultivars are preferred. There are distinctive short white hairs on their lightly colored

EXPLORE
a world of coffee selections
you never knew existed...

Get your coffee program
noticed
with thousands of unique coffee
blends and flavors.

Kaffe Magnum Opus®
SPECIALTY COFFEE ROASTER

800.652.5282 KmoCoffee.com

underside. Larger leaves are deep green in color. Mixing young and old leaves adds complexity since their chemical compositions vary. All pu-erh begins as sun-dried (saiqing mao) tea. It is withered, roasted, rolled and kneaded in the sun before grading.

Sun-dried tea is a form of green tea but quite astringent.

That is why it is later "cooked" (the reference to cooking actually describes a process of ripening and aging by piling the dried tea into great stacks until it turns brown, undergoing oxidation and bacterial fermentation). Raw or "Sheng" pu-erh is steamed and preserved without pile fermentation.

Americans prefer the less astringent, earthy flavor of "cooked" or Shu pu-erh.

MEDICAL BENEFITS

Cao Zi Lin is the general manager of KunMing NanXiang Tea Co., Ltd. a conglomerate with 5,000 acres of tea fields and 1,300 acres of organic high-elevation trees in Cang Yuan county and Shuang Jiang county in Lin Cang Prefecture. The firm's three factories process much of China's medicinal grade pu-erh and is one of the largest exporters of green tea, and organic pu-erh teas.



His headquarters are in the largest city in Yunnan. The firm's Yunnan Cang Yuan Wa Mountain Factory output is 1,500 tons. Its Yunnan line is sold nationally and certified organic by IMO.

When asked to describe the tea's flavor, Lin is at a loss for English words; his enthusiasm is evident in a description relayed by the interpreter.

Speaking at times through an interpreter, Lin describes pu-erh as a special tea with lots of benefits for the body. "It regulates blood pressure, lowers cholesterol and flushes out bad toxins in the blood," he says. Results are certified by scientists and physicians. "That is the reason why it is popular," he explains.

Pu-erh contains catechin, gallic acids as well as complex polyphenols like Theaflavin and Thearubigin. Taken with meals the tea aids in the digestion of fatty foods and increases metabolism, says Lin. Long-term consumption plays an important role in preventing heart disease and cancer, he says.

"We have a lot to learn about pu-erh," says O'Leary. "There is still research that needs to be done, lots of scientific data that we don't have."

One more mystery to unfold. SCR

Made in the USA

Super Mega I Astra 2000

The advertisement features two Astra automated coffee machines, the Super Mega I and the Astra 2000. Both machines are white with black control panels and dispensing ports. The Super Mega I is on the left, and the Astra 2000 is on the right. A red diagonal banner across the top left reads "Made in the USA". Below the machines, their respective names are printed.

Super Mega I and the Astra 2000 are fully automated machines capable of producing several drinks at the touch of a button with automatic temperature controlled steam wand.

Manufactured in Los Angeles and sold worldwide. Used by: universities, hotels, hospitals, casinos, airlines, studios and prominent restaurants.

Astra

Are You
Looking for a

**Fully Automated,
Self-Serve
Fresh Milk
Espresso Machine?
DISCOVER
ASTRA!**

**Extremely Reliable
Consistent & Trouble-free
With 2 Years Parts Warranty**

For more
details, call:

Toll free
877.340.1800
or visit
our website at
www.astramfr.com