

# Master List

GROWERS,  
SELLERS  
AND EVEN  
BLOGGERS  
— MEET THE  
NEW CLASS OF  
TEA GURUS

by Steven Krolak

Two of my greatest passions are tea and words.

Thankfully they don't compete, they coexist. Most often they interact amiably, with tea in a supporting role in the general vicinity of a deadline. But sometimes they get tangled up with one another, like coat hangers or extension cords, or a rueful combination of the two, causing me to trip, stumble and wonder how it all came to be.

So it is with the term "tea master."

This phrase recurs with an almost dismaying predictability in the literature and business of tea. And with good reason: There is something comforting about it, even confidence-inspiring. A tea master is worthy of respect, after all, and possibly awe. And while "master" can have some fairly dubious associations, the presence of "tea" suggests that power will be exercised in a benevolent, even-handed and hopefully not over-steeped way.

Yet this term is used so often, and in so many different contexts, that it seems to lose its meaning. At one extreme, the tea master is seen as a rarefied, monk-like figure who has devoted his entire life to the leaf, a martyr whose ritual asceticism carries over into the arts of tea preparation, and whose profound humility ensures that nobody—not even he—is ever truly worthy of this beverage. At the other extreme, anyone can become a tea master, online, for a fee.

So which is it? And why? What distinguishes a mere tea lover, or even an aficionado, from an exalted tea master? Is tea master an official term with a universally recognized definition and taxpayer ID code? Or is it just a whole pyramid-bagful of marketing dust?

Befitting the complex nature of tea, the answer is ambiguous because the question is not properly phrased. Beyond the extremes—caricatures, I admit—are a range of people from different cultures and backgrounds, with varying aspirations, seeking to define for themselves the meaning of tea mastery as they pursue a deeper knowledge of the beverage they admire.

## WABI-SABI, DOC?

The origins of tea mastery are buried deep in history, but for all practical purposes, our present concept began to emerge in the eighth century with Lu Yu, a Chinese wanderer, seeker, thinker and poet who wrote *"Cha Jing,"* generally translated as "The Book of Tea" or "The Classic of Tea"—although "The Kama Sutra of Tea" would be more accurate. This book detailed, for the first time, the proper way to make tea, along with the implements that should be used. While it focuses on tea technique, the book is famed for its more spiritual dimension. As a proponent of the Buddhist way, Lu Yu advocated a life of simplicity, and his book made a connection between Buddhist ideals and the practice of tea in a way that had never been done before.

In 15th-century Japan, the great Sen no Rikyu went even further than Lu Yu, establishing the image of the tea master as an avatar of style and spiritual insight. Rikyu rose from humble origins to become the chief advisor to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a powerful warlord. Eventually, a conflict arose between the man of contemplation and the man of action. Accused of disloyalty—in all likelihood a fabrication—Rikyu was ordered to commit ritual

suicide, or *hara-kiri*. He committed the act after performing a perfect tea ceremony, thus becoming the first and perhaps only tea martyr. Rikyu's name is linked with *wabi-sabi*, the translation of Zen Buddhist ideals of harmony and simplicity into style and aesthetics. With Rikyu, the tea ceremony became a Zen devotion and the tea master became a sacred figure.

## FROM SHAMAN TO SHOP STEWARD

While owing much to Rikyu's sense of style, today's tea industry generally takes a rather dim view of ritual self-evisceration in the workplace. "I think Western tea consumers tend to romanticize the tea master's role," says Joshua Kaiser, founder and CEO of Milwaukee, Wis.-based Rishi Tea. "The tea master has but one role: to make tea. Or, in some very rare cases, where China is concerned, to represent the tradition of the local tea."

Far from being the village shaman, today's tea master is actually more of a shop foreman—the person responsible for organization, labor or quality control. Kaiser disputes the existence of the universal tea master, preferring instead to apply the term to top people at every link in the tea supply chain. He recognizes a farm-side master as one who has accumulated experience with varietals, knows how to control soil ecology, and grasps the intricacies of planting and harvesting. Similarly, in today's industry, a factory may have several tea-processing masters, people whose job it is "to transform the fresh leaf into an outstanding finished tea product." A given master may have sub-masters for withering or firing, baking or storing.

Next come tasting masters. Kaiser's experience is that the best tasters tend to be specialized in tea from a given region, but there are exceptions. "International buyers who study, travel and taste tea from many regions for many seasons build up a sensory database in their mind and palate, and can find a defect or inherent characteristic of an origin pretty well," Kaiser says.

The final link in production is the tea-blending master, who is responsible for consistency and quality control. Given the many vicissitudes of the current market—bad weather, bubbles and busts—this person represents the substance of a brand's credibility.

Once we cross over into the realm of presentation and serving, the tea master moniker goes wild. This is especially true in Asia, Kaiser notes, where there are tea schools, certifications for brewing, and Rikyu-like trainings in tea arts and culture, some conducted with almost martial-arts intensity. There are masters galore in these structures, with clear-cut areas of expertise and systems for advancement.

But the guru gulch cuts even deeper. For there are still people in remote villages who handle the entire cycle of harvesting and processing themselves, Kaiser says. "They show mastery in all aspects of their specific tea style, and can be considered traditional craftsman masters."

## SMALL-BATCH SUPERSTARS

A few years ago, Pedro Villalon, a brand manager for Procter & Gamble, was climbing up Nannuo Mountain in Yunnan, China, while a local farmer named Yang Si was climbing down. When they

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**AN ACT OF FATE:** Yang Si (left) and Pedro Villalon met on China's Nannuo Mountain, and the two are now in business together; Villalon's Dao Tea offers tea in small batches from masters like Yang Si.

met, Yang Si asked the stranger, "Have you eaten?" Villalon had not, so he accepted an invitation for lunch. This was the beginning of Dao Tea, the Vancouver, B.C.-based company founded by Villalon that markets tea in small batches directly from artisan tea masters like Yang Si. No factories, no blending. This also means no consistency, but that is all part of the plan. "There is no way to have a consistent flavor," says Villalon, likening tea crops to wine vintages. "Every single cup is a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

This deliberate inconsistency makes village tea culture—under assault from industrialized production—part of the uniqueness of the brand. Tea masters are not invisible suppliers but superstars of a different paradigm.

Yang Si, for example, was born into an Aini community on Nannuo Mountain, learned tea from his father, and now spends spring and summer immersed in all aspects of harvesting ancient trees, as well as hand-processing pu-erh tea. Unable to read or write, he is eloquent about the deeper significance of his craft. "Tea is the most important and essential thing in our daily life," he says through an interpreter. Noting that he was born to take up tea, he believes that "true tea masters are made," especially when it comes to quality control. "For a handmade crop, unlike machine crops, only experience counts," he says. "With pu-erh, for example, I know when it is time to kill the enzyme [stop the oxidation process], after it withers under the shadow, by checking the moisture in the stems."

Like Lu Yu before him, Yang Si also sees the profound in the mundane. "Tea spirit is the same as Buddhism spirit," he says.

Villalon's business relies on a handful of artisan tea masters like



Yang Si, in Korea and China. Their farms are family-owned, featuring heritage trees in unspoiled forest settings that are tended without chemical fertilizers. Processing is done by hand, with methods passed down from past generations. Until now, these teas were not sold outside their regions. Through Dao Tea, they reach consumers abroad, which reinforces the farmers' ability to survive in tea. "It is critical to reward the tea artisans for sticking to sustainable agriculture and traditional tea-making techniques," says Villalon. "This allows them to sustain their lifestyle and not yield to the pressure of industrialization."

### LET'S GET REAL

What if you want to master the arts of tea but can't envision throwing over your job, your family, and your house to take a Zen vow of humility and embrace an all-consuming devotion to the leaf—not to mention possibly having to commit hara-kiri in the process?

Chas Kroll, founder and executive director of the San Diego, Calif.-based American Tea Masters Association (ATMA), has just the program for you. Kroll, founder and former CEO of Royal Dynasty Tea, has devised an accelerated course that transforms tea drinkers into Certified Tea Masters.

A longtime proponent of the health benefits of tea, Kroll was frustrated by the lack of a comprehensive approach to tea education in the United States, as well as "the myth that one had to be involved in the tea industry for 10, 15, 20 or more years to be called a tea master." His ATMA educates students in the origins, varieties and practices of tea from around the world. Accepting mastery as a

journey, not a destination, Kroll believes that the process of gaining mastery should involve "attaining excellence and a deep sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment." It must also lead to sharing tea wisdom with others, a key tenet of the ATMA program.

ATMA graduates from around the world have a holistic vision of tea, integrating it into their businesses in unique ways to inject a refreshing creativity into the concept of mastery.

One such alumnus is Phuong Le, founder and CEO of Novi, Mich.-based Ono Tea. She boasts an upbeat online presence through her blog as The Tea Chick and says she believes that becoming a Tea Master has helped her gain credibility on her blog and social media sites. Part traditionalist and part innovator, she believes that tea mastery requires total command of the topic of tea, including picking leaves and knowing origins and serving traditions, as well as being able to translate that knowledge into practice in the form of blends, menus and recommendations.

Le is also an innovative proselyte of tea, with her blog presenting tea wisdom in a hip format that emphasizes health and fitness. "In my blog I get to show my viewers how they can easily incorporate tea into their daily lives," she says. "I cook with tea, write recipes for slimming and detoxing tea smoothies, tea face masks, tea soaks, and delicious tea-infused alcoholic beverages." She also went skydiving to promote an antioxidant green tea—not quite hara-kiri, but close.

In all this, The Tea Chick strives to maintain humility. "If I had an elitist attitude toward my tea mastery, I would intimidate my audience and not be able to connect or hold their attention," she says. "My goal is to make tea approachable, interesting, informative and fun."

Nina Anderson is the founder of Alexandria, Va.-based Saffron's Loft, a holistic wellness business offering workshops that include tailored exercise classes, nutritional guidance and tea education. During her Tea Master training, Anderson became interested in blending for pleasure and health, as well as for therapeutic relaxation. She started to market her own blends as part of wellness packages, through tasting and education workshops, and as gifts. Today she customizes blends "to coincide with the individual's fitness goals" within a varied wellness package. "A good tea master is truly knowledgeable about many types of tea and has made tea an active or daily part of his/her life, either from a nutritional/health standpoint, for the love of tea or both," she says. "To me, a tea master can help others relate to tea as more of an experience rather than simply a drink."

### THE CHALLENGE OF TEA

Mastery, of course, is relative. But one characteristic seems to unify the many strands of mastery in tea—a conviction that tea challenges us to deeper insight. Like wine, with which it is so often compared, tea's complexity, history and diversity demand an effort for it to be fully understood, and for its qualities to be communicated to others. It is tea's intrinsic and largely inexplicable charm that motivates some of us to undertake this challenge.

Kaiser observes that tea is always changing, like the weather, which means the journey never ends: "A true tea master is a constant student." ☀