

The Complex Allure of Oolong

BY MARK
PENDERGRAST

You may be used to the Western style of steeping tea, putting either loose leaves or tea bags into hot water for about five minutes and then discarding the spent leaves. But oolong tea—distinguished from other kinds of tea by virtue of its complexity and wide range of possible flavors—steeps for only a half-minute, producing delicate, delicious, aromatic results. And then it can be steeped again and again.

Centuries ago, the Chinese perfected several elaborate processes for creating oolong tea, a broad category notable for its strong association with *terroir*, distinctive subspecies and complex processing and taste profiles. Oolong undergoes partial oxidation—between 8 percent and 85 percent, depending on the particular style—and yields teas that can be by turns sweet and honeyed, woody and earthy, or light and fresh. (In contrast, green tea undergoes no oxidation, while black tea is fully oxidized.) And unlike other styles, oolong may be baked or roasted prior to rolling, lending yet another layer of complexity to the production process. Much as a specific wine grape can yield numerous, varied expressions depending on where it is grown and how it is vinified, these myriad variables yield a tea that, while difficult to pin down to a certain flavor, is set apart by its overall sophistication and versatility.

To demonstrate the diversity of oolong, I steeped one version of the semi ball-rolled method, the most complicated process of all, as well as a strip-style example, which requires fewer steps. The teas were sourced from Tea Trekker (www.teatrekker.com), a premium tea seller owned by Bob and Mary Lou Heiss of Northampton, Mass., co-authors of *The Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide*.

I started with Tieguanyin Anxi Region Traditional-Style Spring Pluck 2015 (\$25 for 4 ounces) from Fujian Province in southeastern China. As with all tea, the shrubs that produce oolong are *Camellia sinensis*, but in Fujian they are a special subvariety that often survives for hundreds of years. Harvested at midday, the leaves are treated in 18 steps over 36 hours. The process involves withering, cooling, sun-drying, bruising, shaking by hand, resting, rolling in a cloth bag in a machine that resembles a small cement mixer, baking, sorting and a final roast. As the leaves are rolled, they compress into little nuggets, a method originally



Oolong tea, brewed in a Chinese *gaiwan* pot, can be steeped repeatedly.



ON A ROLL

Traditional-style Tieguanyin, with semi ball-rolled leaves, undergoes an elaborate 18-step treatment process.

“ROCK TEA”

Rou Gui, grown in the mountainous Wu Yi Shan region in Fujian Province, is dried in long, slender strips.



developed to make them easier to transport.

From Tea Trekker, I had purchased a traditional *gaiwan*, a small porcelain tea steeper that comprises a bowl, dish and lid. I packed the *gaiwan* half full of semi ball-rolled tea and moistened it with water I had brought to a boil and let cool for a couple of minutes. I then immediately poured off the water—a process that loosens and prepares the leaf.

Next, I filled the *gaiwan* with the off-the-boil water and timed it for 30 seconds before pouring the liquid into a small teacup. The tea smelled rich, grassy and a little musty. I took my first sip of the russet liquid and swirled it in my mouth, noting its smoothness, acidity and notes of hickory nut and cinnamon toast. After I finished the small cup, I repeated the half-minute steep over the same leaves. This infusion produced a somewhat stronger cup. The third round was a little less intense. I thought that perhaps the tea was spent, but I was wrong. I steeped five consecutive cups, and the results were unpredictable and slightly different each time. The following day, I did another five

steepings with the same leaves. The tea continued to reveal nuances of taste and aroma, the last steep just as strong and delicious as the first.

Next I sampled the Rou Gui Wu Yi Shan Yan Cha Late Spring Pluck 2015 (\$30 for 4 ounces). This strip-style looked completely different than the semi ball-rolled example. This style does not go through quite as many processing steps as the semi ball; after being twisted, squeezed and lightly oxidized and roasted, the leaves are left in long, slender, curly strips. Like the Tieguanyin, they are grown in Fujian Province, but in its northwestern region, Wu Yi Shan, where the mountain peaks are usually covered in clouds and mist. The ancient tea bushes here, pruned so that they have only one central trunk, with fewer branches and large leaves that concentrate the flavor, produce “rock tea” (*yan cha*), referring to the crumbling cliffs on which they grow under harsh conditions. This distinctive *terroir* allegedly adds to the flavor.

I loaded the *gaiwan* about two-thirds full with Rou Gui, since it would not unfurl and expand as much as the previous samples. The steeped tea was a golden amber color, and my favorite of these two extraordinary oolongs. It revealed a mild jasmine aroma, a light, brisk taste with notes of apricot and tangerine and a long sweet finish, steep after steep.

Mark Pendergrast is the author of Uncommon Grounds, a history of coffee.