

Feb/Mar: The Magic of How It's Made: One Tea, Infinite Processes

Hello Travelers!

As you learn about begin to prepare your own [Gongfu tea](#), some ancient truths will begin to reveal themselves: while origin, cultivar, and terroir matters, it's how the tea is processed that determines the tea's category and ending flavor.

This is why all true Chinese teas come from same *Camellia sinensis* tree but there are still several categories of tea. What differentiates white from green, oolong from black, or raw from ripe Pu-erh isn't the plant itself — it's what happens to the leaf after harvest (and, sometimes, *when* the leaves are harvested).

Processing includes several parts: oxidation, withering, shaping, aging, and microbial activity (fermentation). There are thousands of possible technique and timeline combinations possible so it should come as no surprise many Chinese tea plantations or even families have developed their own specific processing methods to create their specific “brand” of tea.

Today we're exploring six primary Chinese tea categories, specifically through the lens of [Gongfu preparation](#).

[White Tea](#) (白茶) — **Controlled Withering & Minimal Intervention**

White tea processing is deceptively simple – it's often called “minimally processed” but make no mistake: its processing is still highly technical.

White tea basically has only two processing steps: harvesting and withering. Fresh buds and/or young leaves are plucked and then allowed to wither (or sit out on a tarp, in a cave, or other designated area) for an extended period of time. During withering, moisture content decreases while enzymatic activity begins transforming amino acids and aromatic compounds.

Sounds simple, but when, for how long, and where the withering takes place can drastically alter the aroma, color and flavor of the tea.

For example, white teas are traditionally withered in shaded, well-ventilated environments, but a notable exception to this rule is [Charcoal Roasted Silver Needle](#) tea by Li Yanmei, a tea master in

Funding.

For that tea, buds for that tea are harvested before they even open and then withered for a longer-than-usual time in the shade. So far, so good. But then the withering process is finished in the sun

Unlike other teas, white teas are made without rolling or pan-firing the tea leaves. Instead, oxidation occurs naturally and lightly during this slow dehydration phase.

White teas are particularly well suited to Gongfu style brewing because the extended withering deepens aromatics and softens the texture of the leaves. This becomes particularly noticeable when brewed using the short, concentrated infusions that is the hallmark of Gongfu.



Green Tea (??) – Shaqing & Preservation of Freshness

Green tea is defined by *kill-green* (??, shāqīng) — the application of heat shortly after plucking to halt enzymatic oxidation. This step preserves chlorophyll - hence the green color - amino acids like L-theanine, and volatile compounds responsible for vegetal and chestnut notes.

In China, shāqīng is often achieved through pan-firing or baking rather than steaming (steaming is more common in Japanese teas). Once heated, the leaves are shaped — often in ways specific to the particular tea; they may be twisted, flattened or curled — and then dried.

One of the best examples of an intricate green tea process is [Dragon Well Tea](#). Declared the official tea of the royal court by Emperor Qianlong during the Qing Dynasty, this light, fresh tea exemplifies all the hallmarks of green tea craftsmanship.

Even the harvesting is specific, with exactly one bud and two leaves getting plucked from the tea tree. The leaves are then withered in the sun and then fix, shaped and dried over heat in a pan.

Green teas tend to have an umami note because the oxidation is halted early though like all Chinese teas a range of flavors and aromas are possible. Gongfu brewing specifically highlights their texture and minerality, but that does require lower temperatures and short infusions.



Oolong Tea (???) — Orchestrated Partial Oxidation

Oolong processing is known for a wide range of oxidation, anywhere from roughly 10% to 70% depending on the process used. It is among the most complex in Chinese tea craftsmanship and some varieties, such as [Yellow Twig](#), even require extra attention and effort when brewing (but are well worth it!).

Generally speaking, oolong tea leaves are first sun-withered, then moved indoors for a series of resting and shaking cycles. During shaking (yaoqing), the leaf edges are gently bruised, encouraging oxidation at the margins while preserving a greener interior.

Oxidation levels can range roughly from 10% to 70%, depending on style. After reaching the desired oxidation point, the leaves undergo kill-green to halt the process, followed by rolling and, often, roasting.

[Bird King Da Hong Pao](#), is roasted twice in accordance with a the family tradition of Tea Master Lian in Guizhou. The tea itself is foraged from indigenous Bird Trees that are that are 400- to 800-years old and have been protected by the Miao people for centuries.

Lightly oxidized oolongs emphasize florals and high aromatics; heavily oxidized and roasted styles develop deeper fruit, honey, or caramel notes. The difference can be start and apparent even just by looking at the leaves themselves. Gongfu brewing is particularly suited to oolong because repeated infusions reveal its layered processing.



Black/Red Tea (??) — Full Oxidation

In Chinese classification, black tea is called *hong cha* (red tea), referring to the liquor color. Black/Red Chinese teas are all fully oxidized before drying, making them the most assertive teas in the Chinese canon.

Full oxidation is achieved by first withering the leaves so they are pliable and then rupturing the cell walls of the leaves by twisting or rolling them. That triggers full oxidation by exposing enzymes in the tea leaves to oxygen. The rich colors - ranging from inky black to deep amber hues - come from catechins converting into theaflavins.

Unlike heavily roasted teas, black teas typically emphasize fruit, malt, cocoa, or honeyed profiles, but there is still a range of flavor and color within the vast black tea family. For example, [Jin Jun Mei](#) (a “red” tea) is known for a light, fruity flavor whereas [Black Phoenix](#) has a more bold, cacao-like taste.

Gongfu brewing a black tea is especially enjoyable because the flavor of the tea can transition from bright top notes in early steeps to deeper sweetness later on.



Dark Tea & Pu-erh (黑茶 / 普洱) — Post-Fermentation & Aging

Dark teas differ fundamentally from other categories due to microbial fermentation.

Raw ([sheng](#)) Pu-erh begins as a green-style maocha that is sun-dried but not fully stabilized. Over time — years or decades — natural microbial activity transforms the leaf, deepening flavor and smoothing bitterness. One of the Tea Tavern’s most happy accidents was discovering [1995 “Green Pu-erh” tea](#), which – as the name suggests – has been fermenting since 1995. The result! A smoky undertone reminiscent of BBQ sauce!

Ripe ([shu](#)) Pu-erh undergoes an accelerated fermentation process called *wo dui*, where leaves are piled, moistened, and carefully turned to encourage microbial development under controlled conditions. One of the best examples of this method is the luxurious [Tei Ji Shu Pu-erh](#) tea which is wet fermented for a very specific amount of time.



As you refine your Gongfu practice, try tasting across categories while focusing on how processing expresses itself in the cup — from the bright immediacy of green tea to the layered depth of aged dark tea.

Or, come to a [Traveling Tea Tavern meetup](#) and watch the process unfold for yourself! You can ask questions, meet like-minded tea lovers and sample new teas!

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