

September 2026 Newsletter

What's Really in Your Teacup? Part II

Beyond Organic: The Many Paths to Thoughtfully Grown Tea

The Quest Continues

In last month's *Chronicle*, we began a journey into one of tea's most complicated—and frequently misunderstood—subjects: pesticides, fertilizers, and what they actually mean for the tea in your cup.

We discovered that the story isn't as simple as "natural good, chemical bad." Tea farmers, magicians of a sort in their rite, work within complicated ecosystems, climates, economies, and traditions. The choices they make depend on everything from soil conditions and rainfall to regional insects, plant diseases, labor practices, and the needs of the communities that depend on each harvest.

This month, we're venturing behind label stamps like "organic" and deep into the tea gardens themselves.

The quest will uncover truths such as: What does *organic* tea actually mean? What makes farming *regenerative*? And what can tea forests cultivated for centuries teach us about growing tea alongside nature rather than simply extracting from it?

There are many enchanted paths that lead to a perfect cup of Chinese tea, and we're ready to explore all of them. If this intrigues you, see us in person at one of our [Traveling Tea Tavern events](#) where you can sample our wares while continuing this conversation with our Master Tea Brewer, Farrah.

But for now, our journey on the path to thoughtfully grown tea continues...

Quick Answer

Is organic tea always more sustainable—or better tea?

Not necessarily. Organic certification establishes meaningful standards for how crops are grown and restricts most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, but "**organic**" **isn't synonymous with pesticide-free**, nor does the label by itself tell us everything about biodiversity, soil health, farmer livelihoods, flavor, or the long-term health of a tea garden.

Meanwhile, plenty of growers who use traditional, ecological, low-input, agroforestry, or regenerative methods may employ practices that protect soil and biodiversity without necessarily carrying an organic certification.

The question isn't: **"Is this tea organic?"**

The better question to ask is: **"How was this tea grown?"**

Traveler's Notes

- Organic certification restricts most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, but that does not mean that no pesticides or fertilizers may ever be used.
- Sustainable tea farming doesn't follow a single universal process; it is often dictated by local ecosystems, climates, traditions passed through generations (if not centuries, in some cases of Chinese tea), and the availability of cultivation and natural resources.
- Regenerative agriculture aims to go beyond reducing environmental harm and also improve soil health, biodiversity, water management, and climate resilience.
- Biodiversity within tea gardens can influence plant health and, more importantly, some of the chemical compounds associated with tea flavor and aroma.
- Traditional tea-forest systems demonstrate that tea cultivation and complex forest ecosystems can coexist for centuries.
- A certification can be useful information, but it's important to understand the grower, landscape, and cultivation philosophy—a much richer story—before judging a tea by its certificate (or lack thereof).

So...What Does "Organic" Actually Mean?

"Organic" gets tossed around often enough that it's easy to imagine it simply means **grown naturally**.

In reality, certified organic is a regulated agricultural standard.

In the United States, [USDA organic standards](#) require farms to use specific practices that foster resource cycling, promote ecological balance, maintain or improve soil and water quality, minimize synthetic materials, and conserve biodiversity.

But here's where one of tea's persistent myths encounters a Mimic disguised as a treasure chest:

Organic does not mean "nothing was sprayed on this plant."

Unless a synthetic substance is specifically allowed and permits natural substances, USDA rules generally prohibit them. That means [certain pest controls, soil amendments, and other agricultural inputs](#) can be used within certified organic production.

That's not a loophole. It's part of how agriculture works because it must operate within the laws of nature itself. Tea trees will hunger for nutrients while fending off bugs that are hungry for *them*.

Fungi is a particularly insidious enemy that pays no heed to man-made certification programs.

When analyzing a tea plantation or farm's practices, one's moralistic lens mustn't cloud the reality of the communities whose entire economies and livelihoods can depend on a viable, sellable crop being grown.

Fortunately, the communities know they receive their sustenance from the Earth and consequently are deeply conscientious stewards of their land. And, in the case of many Chinese teas specifically, ancient, time-honored practices still in use predate modern chemical agricultural aids, so synthetic materials may be minimally used or not used at all.

Certification does tell a conscientious tea drinker important information about **which practices and substances a grower may use**. But it won't tell them everything about the farm and its individual practices.

That's why the Tea Tavern aims to include this information whenever possible in our tea descriptions, such as in the case of Snowfall White or Phoenix's High Mountain Oolong.

Beyond the Label

Here is where our map begins to branch into several paths.

First, let us visit a tea garden that is managed thoughtfully but is not certified as organic.

These tea growers, often with small tea farms or deeply loyal to traditional methods, may use compost, plant matter, manual weed management, beneficial insects, surrounding vegetation, mixed plantings, or other low-input techniques while never pursuing formal certification. After all, not every spell is written on a scroll.

Other Chinese tea farmers meld the past and present using a specific alchemy that results in superior teas. They may combine ancient agricultural wisdom with modern ecological practices. For example, they may ferment their tea the same way it was fermented hundreds of years ago while also managing to sustain a much larger crop to meet global demand using environmentally friendly pesticides. Or perhaps they introduce biodiversity to maintain soil health and modern irrigation infrastructure.

Finally, there is the growing popularity of **regenerative agriculture**, a science-backed magic that renews the Earth herself.

As every spellcaster knows, however, words matter.

The terms "sustainable," "ecological," "natural," and "regenerative" aren't interchangeable. And, unlike USDA Organic, not all of these phrases refer to one universal regulatory standard.

That said, all three farming philosophies share an important idea:

A healthy tea plant begins with a healthy place in which to grow it.

Regenerative Agriculture: Leaving the Land Better Than You Found It

Sustainable agriculture aims to reduce harm to the soil and surrounding ecosystem. But regenerative agriculture dares to ask a far bolder question:

“ Can farming actively *improve* the ecosystem supporting it?

[Regenerative approaches](#) generally emphasize interconnected goals such as healthier soils, greater biodiversity, better water management, reduced dependence on external inputs, and greater resilience to climate change.

The Rainforest Alliance's current Regenerative Agriculture Standard, for example, focuses on crop resilience, soil health, biodiversity, and water management while *also* retaining focus on the *people* who grow crops through requirements related to human rights and livelihoods.

In a Chinese tea garden, regenerative practices might include anything from composting, maintaining ground cover, protecting waterways, encouraging beneficial plants and insects, reducing unnecessary chemical inputs, planting or preserving shade trees, and building organic matter in the soil.

In other words, the farm becomes less like a factory floor where tea happens to grow and more like an ecosystem in which tea is one particularly delicious resident.

Traveler's Tip

In a way, regenerative farming is a bit like restoring hit points to the entire party instead of repeatedly healing only the fighter.

Of course the tea plant or tree matters. But a tea tree on its own is nothing without healthy soil, good water, helpful insects (and protection from harmful bugs and fungi), beneficial surrounding plants and wildlife, a dedicated farmer, and communities – who often are the harvesters and guards- keeping the whole adventure going.

When Biodiversity Reaches the Teacup

Environmental stewardship is a worthy goal all by itself. But as we've explored many times in these pages, **the environment in which tea grows shapes the tea itself.**

Tea trees that grow between cold, craggy mountain rocks tend to be smaller and sometimes covered with fur. Other tea leaves unfurl large and flat to absorb as much sun as possible. Still other teas taste best when their buds are plucked early. Or perhaps only the leaves offer sips of bliss, the buds left on the branch to feed the next year's crop.

The story of [tea chemistry](#) doesn't end there, either. Variety, elevation, weather, season, soil, processing, storage, and brewing all affect what brew eventually warms your waiting cup.

[Cultivation practices](#) can be another part of that equation.

A 2026 scientific review examining [biodiversity in tea plantations](#) found that genetic, species, and ecosystem diversity can influence the accumulation of polyphenols, amino acids, and aromatic compounds—all important contributors to tea quality.

Researchers are also examining the [relationship between soil management and flavor](#). A seven-year field study published in 2026 found that organic fertilizers improved several measures of soil health and microbial diversity compared with synthetic fertilizer alone. One organic treatment using rapeseed cake was also associated with increased concentrations of aroma compounds including geraniol and linalool.

While that doesn't mean an organic label magically produces a tastier cup of tea, it does illustrate a truth that the earliest Chinese tea farmers probably knew before lab testing even existed: **Tea is a deeply integral part of its environment.**

Change the soil, shade, microorganisms, surrounding plants, water, weather, or farming practices, and you may change the tea tree itself enough to produce an entirely different cup of tea.

For Travelers and Mages who enjoy thinking about [terroir](#), this is where agriculture becomes part of the tea tasting adventure.

The Ancient Tea Forests of Jingmai Mountain

For more than a thousand years, the Blang and Dai peoples of Jingmai Mountain in China's Yunnan Province have cultivated tea within a forest landscape rather than replacing the surrounding ecosystem with a conventional monoculture plantation.

Today, the [Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er](#) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Old tea forests, traditional villages, protective forests, and tea plantations sweep across the ancient landscape. The tea trees grow beneath the sheltering shade of the forest canopy, part of an agricultural system adapted to the mountain's climate, topography, plants, and wildlife.

This "understory cultivation" method is a sustainable land-use system shaped by more than a millennium of knowledge passed down through countless generations of Blang and Dai communities, according to UNESCO.

That, dear Travelers, is magic manifested in real life. Every tea leaf that unfurls, season after season, carries within its cells a deeply held relationship between people, tea trees, forests, traditions, and place that has long outlasted man-made lines drawn on maps by war, weather or

time.

The Travelers who read these newsletters, and indeed many modern tea drinkers, are a caring, kind folk, generally speaking. They care about learning the art of Gongfu brewing, sharing tea and friendship, and bravely exploring new flavors and varieties of tea.

Of course they care about sustaining the planet. They want to support cultivators of tea who aren't just growers in a massive economic commodity chain but stewards of land, tradition, art, and craft.

So it will come as no surprise to our dear readers that, sometimes, finding the most sustainable and kind tea isn't about new certifications, regulations, farming technology or modern processing (though those, too, have a place in the Chinese tea pantheon).

Rather, sustainable tea is more often than not about remembering what growers already knew for centuries.

So Which Farming Method Is Best?

So now, after two months and a rather long trek through Chinese tea fields and traditions, Travelers may hope we'll finally reveal the One True Cultivation Method.

Alas.

The keenest observers amongst you will have already discerned that there is no Superior Tea Cultivation Spell to be cast. Rather, each cultivation method acts more like separate ingredients that may (or may not) be added or subtracted to create a perfect potion (or tea, in this case).

Organic certification can provide proof of adherence to some valuable standards and accountability for the final product.

Regenerative agriculture helps restore soil and strengthen ecosystems.

Traditional and agroforestry systems can preserve biodiversity and generations of agricultural knowledge.

Carefully managed conventional agriculture allows growers facing difficult pest, climate, labor, or economic conditions to maintain viable harvests.

And any of the above systems can be practiced thoughtfully—or poorly, just as a healing potion can become a toxic brew when incorrectly mixed.

That's why Tea Tavern doesn't make decisions based on a single word or logo on a package. We know it can never tell the whole story of the journey from leaf to cup.

We would rather ask questions and get the fullest answers available to us.

Who grew this tea?

Where did it grow?

How was the land managed?

What was added to the environment or processes, and why?

How does the grower approach the long-term health of the garden?

And, of course...

What does the tea taste like? What experience does it offer the taster?

What Thoughtful Sourcing Means at Tea Tavern

At Tea Tavern, sustainability isn't about chasing whichever label happens to sound most virtuous.

It's about seeking [teas](#) from growers whose practices demonstrate respect for their plants, their land, and the traditions behind their craft.

Some, like [Obsidian Embers](#), are certified organic teas. Others, such as [Snowall White](#), may use natural fertilizers, traditional farming practices, low-input cultivation, ecological pest management, or other methods suited to their particular tea gardens.

“What matters to us is the story behind the tea—and whether the choices made along the way reflect thoughtful stewardship.

Neither tea is remarkable merely because of what wasn't put on the plants, but instead what *was* put into the tea's cultivation:

Ancient, time-tested knowledge.

Stewardship.

Craft.

Tradition.

And an enormous amount of work long before those leaves ever reached your cup.

Whether you're [new to Gongfu tea brewing](#) or an experienced Traveler who can identify a favorite mountain range by the smell of the gaiwan, we hope this two-part Chronicle has offered something more useful than another list of things to fear.

We hope it gives you better questions to ask.

Because the more we learn about tea, the more apparent one thing becomes:

A good cup doesn't begin with using [the right water](#) (though that *is* important, and we can help with that).

It begins with healthy soil, living ecosystems, skilled growers, and choices made months—or sometimes generations—before the kettle ever sings.

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? Curious where your next adventure begins?

<https://www.tea-tavern.com/>

? Experience the journey in person!

<https://www.tea-tavern.com/events/>

Join us for one of our immersive Gongfu tea tastings, educational workshops, or pop-up adventures, where every gathering is a chance to explore the history, culture, and craftsmanship behind every cup. This month we'll be at [Expansion 2026](#), an event we're proudly sponsoring that celebrates immigration, bicultural identity, and life between cultures.

Until next month's *Chronicle*...

May your kettle stay warm, your cup stay full, and your adventures always bring new discoveries.

Frequently Asked Questions from Fellow Travelers

Is organic tea pesticide-free?

Not necessarily. Organic certification restricts most synthetic pesticides, but approved natural substances and certain specifically permitted synthetic materials may still be used. "Organic" describes a regulated production system rather than guaranteeing that absolutely no pest-control products were involved.

Source: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/national-list-allowed-and-prohibited-substances>

Is organic tea better for the environment?

Organic farming standards include practices intended to promote ecological balance, conserve biodiversity, and maintain or improve soil and water quality. However, the environmental impact of any individual tea garden depends on many factors, including local conditions and how the farm is actually managed. Organic certification is therefore useful information, but not the only information worth considering.

Source: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service

<https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic/labeling>

What is regenerative tea farming?

Regenerative agriculture focuses on improving the health and resilience of the agricultural ecosystem rather than only reducing harm. Depending on the farm, that can include improving soil health, increasing biodiversity, protecting water, maintaining ground cover or shade trees, and reducing dependence on external inputs.

Sources: Rainforest Alliance

<https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/insights/what-is-regenerative-agriculture/>

<https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/resource-item/regenerative-tea-scorecard/>

Does the way tea is farmed affect its flavor?

It can. Tea flavor is influenced by many factors, including cultivar, climate, elevation, season, processing, and storage, but research also indicates that biodiversity, shade, soil conditions, fertilization, and microbial communities can influence compounds associated with tea quality and aroma. Farming method is one part of a much larger flavor story.

Sources:

<https://www.mdpi.com/1424-2818/18/3/155>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167880925005602>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9775167/>

What are traditional tea forests?

Traditional tea forests integrate tea trees into a larger forest ecosystem rather than growing tea exclusively as a uniform monoculture. One extraordinary example is Jingmai Mountain in Yunnan, China, where Blang and Dai communities have maintained an understorey tea-cultivation system for more than a thousand years. UNESCO inscribed the landscape on the World Heritage List in 2023.

Source: UNESCO World Heritage Center

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1665>

How can I choose more thoughtfully grown tea?

Look beyond a single label. Ask where the tea was grown, who produced it, what cultivation practices were used, and whether the vendor can tell you something meaningful about the grower and garden. Certifications can provide useful information, but transparency and traceability can help you understand the larger story.

Sources & Further Reading

Curious adventurers are always welcome to consult the original research. These resources helped inform this month's *Chronicle* and offer a deeper look at organic certification, regenerative agriculture, biodiversity, tea quality, and traditional tea-growing landscapes.

Organic Agriculture & Certification

- USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. *Labeling Organic Products*.
- <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic/labeling>
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Regenerative Agriculture & Tea

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- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167880925005602>
- *Impacts of Ecological Shading by Roadside Trees on Tea Foliar Nutritional and Bioactive Components, Community Diversity of Insects and Soil Microbes in Tea Plantation*.
- <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9775167/>

Traditional Tea Forests & Cultural Landscapes

- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *Cultural Landscape of Old Tea Forests of the Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er*.
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