

Tea 101



There are three basic categories of tea which differ according to the manner in which they are produced. Green, Oolong and Black teas each have their respective subcategories such as white, yellow, light or heavily oxidized, or compressed. The diverse environmental conditions in which the plants are grown, the age and number of leaves used, and the final appearance of the leaves also contribute to creating the enormous variety of products on the market. Most of the best teas are still processed entirely by hand.

The steps in processing can be different for different teas and each area has its own unique style. In general the leaves are picked and then carried back to the factory. They are spread out on cool, shaded floors or drying trays to wilt from a few minutes to several hours. Next the leaves undergo a sequence of heating steps either in a large wok (pan frying) or in a hot air tumbling machine. The heat removes some of the moisture and also stops or slows the oxidation process by destroying the volatile enzymes. While the leaves are heated, they are also being rolled, by hand or machine. This step serves to break down the cell structure and begin to give a shape to the leaves. For the famous Dragon Well green tea from China it takes about 4.5 lbs. of fresh leaves to produce 1 lb of finished tea and about 45 minutes from start to finish.

Green teas are dried completely and handled gently. They can be curled (ex. Pi Lo Chun) or twisted - called Mei or Eyebrow teas (ex. Zhen Mei) or can be rolled into pellets - called Zhu or Pearl teas (ex. Gunpowder). The leaves can also be pressed flat (ex. Dragon Well) or left in a very natural crude shape. For black teas, the heating steps are alternated with resting steps. Controlling the heat and degree of oxidation are crucial in determining the tea's flavor. Oolong teas first undergo a step wherein the fresh leaves are gently tossed around on a rattan tray. The goal is to gently bruise the outer edge of the leaf. The outer edge therefore oxidizes faster than the inside and in effect, the leaf is both green and black tea at the same time.



To finish, as with black teas, the leaves are baked to remove any remaining moisture. Teas are usually graded and sorted for consistency of leaf size, whole leaves being the most prized. Teas are commonly referred to as fermented (black tea) and non-fermented (green tea) though this term is technically incorrect. There is no actual fermentation or distilling of the leaves. The correct term is oxidation.

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For fine green teas, the earlier in the year the leaves are picked, the better. In China, those picked before the Spring Festival of Qing Ming are the most tender.



Quite prized and often rare these teas are usually lighter in taste and aroma, though smoother and more elegant. Picked completely by hand, it is no small feat to gather all the young buds and leaves in the few short days available. Bad weather can ruin the entire year's crop.

In 2004, for Pi Lo Chun green tea from Suzhou, China, the first day of picking was April 14th and the last was the 21st. It took 60,000 buds to make just one kilo of finish tea. It took 7 lbs of fresh leaves to make 1lb of finished tea.

For some teas there can be several pickings. When a new bud comes out or "flushes" it is picked and processed. Spring is the First Flush but there may also be Summer, Autumn and even Winter pickings. A second flush tea would refer to leaves that were from the second harvesting of the tea bushes. After the leaves are finished they are sorted for uniformity. Whole leaves, large then smaller pieces are separated. Leaves are graded according to the season they were picked, flush and size. In most places outside the orient, a letter system is used to define the leaves finished grade.

For example, a fine Darjeeling may have the grade SFTGFOP which stands for Special Fancy Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe. By the way, there is no orange flavor in Orange Pekoe. It currently refers only to a small particle of tea leaf. BOP stands for Broken Orange Pekoe. Here the leaves are intentionally broken.

These grades as well as Fannings or Dust quickly produce a very strong infusion and so are most suitable for teabags.