

Tea Masters, Experts, & Pioneers

The North American specialty tea industry has roots and ties to significant knowledge, hundreds of individuals who have invested sweat and personal capital in a vision that America could become a dynamic, innovative tea community. A soft poll of specialty tea industry participants in 2012 suggests one individual who best represents the core founding fathers of specialty tea in America — Mike Spillane, the third-generation owner-manager of The G.S. Haly Company (Redwood City, California).

While many other names pop up, Spillane is consistently acknowledged by industry veterans as the one individual who pioneered higher quality teas (originally referred to as “premium teas,” with “specialty teas” emerging years later as the favored term). He also personally funded the first U.S. tea trade association for specialty tea, The American Premium Tea Institute (APTI), which later morphed into the Specialty Tea Institute, with Spillane and APTI’s directors later turning over the reins to a stream of other tea industry companies and related tea associations.

For decades, Spillane has spent thousands of hours educating, coaching, and mentoring new and existing tea brands through the tumultuous waters of this complex business — most of it on his dime and time. Most of these fortunate recipients have remained loyal friends and customers, while a few grabbed the knowledge they could and built their tea empires without looking back, or even offering a simple “thank you.” Spillane takes it all in stride and smiles when queried about his passionate vision, commitment, and investment in others on the specialty tea business path.

Mike Spillane, perhaps more than any other individual in North America, can claim the titles of Tea Master (he has cupped tens of thousands of teas), Tea Expert (he has purchased hundreds of tons of specialty tea), and Tea Pioneer (his was the first American voice to proclaim that better quality tea had a

bright future in America). Mike’s pioneering efforts are all the more impressive as his vision was put forth at a time when low-quality black teas in tea bags and canned iced tea — made from instant tea powders and loads of sugar — dominated grocery shelves in this country.

The Specialty Tea Is “Hot” Report 7th Edition sought out some of North America’s authentic tea masters, experts, and pioneers for insight into their unique craft. The term “tea master” is often misused by those seeking to prematurely proclaim their supreme competence and mastery in a field where complexity demands years and even decades of hands-on experience. True tea masters, like their brethren in the field of martial arts, theater, and other realms of antiquity, do not rely upon a few classes, costumes, printed certificates, or self-aggrandizement to tell the world of the mastery that they have legitimately achieved.

Tea masters sample thousands — perhaps tens of thousands — of cups of tea on the path to true tea wisdom, but hands-on experience in tea fields — studying tea plants, processing methods, brewing techniques, and much more — is also a vital part of the knowledge this true mastery requires. Ultimately, the authentic tea master does not see him or herself as superior to others on the tea path, but rather as one whose passion for tea benefits from years of self-sacrifice in order to gain more knowledge.

In recent years, the global rise in the enjoyment of all things tea is pushing thousands of tea connoisseurs into a serious pursuit of tea knowledge. Many of these individuals will reach a level of understanding and wisdom that will allow them to legitimately claim the title of tea master. However, anything short of committed time and experience on the way to true tea mastery will detract not only from the individual, but from the tea community as well. The tea master’s devotion, passion, and understanding helps make the entire ‘tea world’ a much better place indeed.

Jeffrey McIntosh, McIntosh Tea

Jeffrey McIntosh is a tea-master in the making, a bold entrepreneur, and a man whose love for life and steadfast focus have filled his days with extraordinary people, unforgettable experiences, and stories to tell. The rich tapestry of his life has created in him a resolute determination to live each day fully — cultivating happiness, deep relationships, and personal morality — all with a cup of tea in hand. Jeffrey has devoted his entire life to mastering the art of tea and tea culture, and sharing it with everyone around him. His Seattle company, McIntosh Tea, is dedicated to bringing the highest quality Pu-erh teas to the American market and educating people in the way of tea. It is his simple aim to connect people with teas they will truly enjoy. “Be happy. Drink good tea.”

Mr. McIntosh can be reached at: info@mcintoshtea.com

Q What is Pu-erh Tea? Where and how is it produced?

Pu-erh is a unique type of tea that stands apart from the regular white, green, and black teas in that it undergoes two stages of oxidation: first due to exposure to sunlight and oxygen right after the tea leaves are picked, and second, the result of the leaves' interaction with various forms of microflora that are present on the tea leaves. This secondary oxidation, sometimes called “fermentation” (albeit somewhat erroneously), takes time, and thus pu-erh tea is generally aged before consumption.

Pu-erh comes in two categories: raw and ripe. Raw pu-erh is that which is left to “ferment” slowly over long periods of time with no human aid. Ripe pu-erh is artificially sprayed with strains of bacteria and fungus in a controlled factory setting, left to sit in large, wet piles, and rolled around every so often until the tea ferments. Raw tea can take ten or twenty years to ferment to a desired stage, while ripe tea can be aged in only six months.

Pu-erh tea is not simply tea that has been aged; some baked oolongs, for example, also undergo an aging process. To be considered pu-erh, the tea leaves must be picked from the broad-leaved variety of the tea tree, *Camellia sinensis* assamica, which typically grows in the southern region of China called Yunnan. Pu-erh leaves are harvested from trees that grow on a select few mountain ranges in this region, both cultivated and wild.

The production methods for pu-erh have remained

basically unchanged over the last few thousand years, with the exception of the advent of machinery to help the packing process. During harvest season, leaves are picked by hand, many times by indigenous peoples living in remote mountain villages. The leaves are wilted to the stage of a green tea, then are either sun-dried, heated in an oven, or lightly roasted over a flame to stop the oxidation process and preserve the green color. These dried, wilted leaves are then steamed and pressed into various shapes of compressed tea-cakes, wrapped in paper, and packed together in groups of seven and stored to allow the secondary oxidation to occur.

Q Is pu-erh always aged for a specific amount of time and under certain conditions? Is it actually inoculated with beneficial bacteria?

In the case of ripe pu-erh, yes it is inoculated. Very precise measures of bacteria and fungus are added to the tea leaves in the production facility by skilled workers. This is a delicate process because too much of one or the other bacteria or fungus could ruin the batch. Temperature and humidity are also carefully controlled, and inspectors in the factories turn the piles of tea regularly to determine when it is finished fermenting. This process, called wet-piling, was developed by the Menghai factory in the early seventies to meet the rapidly growing demand for aged tea.

For raw pu-erh, the storage conditions are often carefully controlled, but not always. In some cases, the fermentation of raw pu-erh is left to occur on its own,



organically and naturally. Many times raw, compressed cakes of pu-erh will simply be left to sit in caves after they've been pressed, a stark contrast to the white lab-coat factories that ripe pu-erh comes from. Originally, raw pu-erh was aged only by necessity, as tea picked in Yunnan was compressed into bricks or cakes for easy transportation, loaded onto horses, and taken to other parts of the country. This journey could take a year or more to reach some destinations, so along the way, the tea, exposed to heat, humidity, and a wealth of microflora, would naturally ferment.

For personal storage, keep ripe and raw teas separate, and each in a medium-humidity, room-temperature environment away from strong scents and extreme fluctuations in temperature.

Q How did your interest and passion for pu-erh start and how have you furthered your knowledge of this fascinating type of tea?

My interest in tea and my passion for pu-erh happened at different times. I fell in love with tea the first time I drank it. I was at a small tea shop in Seattle's international district. The owner sat down and made tea for me and I immediately felt at peace. My troubles seemed further away with every sip. I was calm, and my body felt warm. I immediately quit the art school I was attending and became her apprentice, making no money, but I was happy. My tea path had been illuminated. That was about six years ago.

Sometime ago I had an opportunity to travel to Yunnan with one of the tea shop customer's friends, so I took it. We traveled around southern China, visited pu-erh tea factories and farms, and walked through centuries-old tea forests in the majestic mountain ranges of Yunnan. I was enthralled by the beauty and culture that surrounded pu-erh. The first cup I tasted was unforgettable. I was so used to Taiwanese High Mountain oolongs and teas of this sort, and the almost medicinal qualities of fresh raw pu-erh took me by surprise. Nevertheless, I was hooked.

In Yunnan, I met a tea master who owned a large tea company and I had the opportunity to extend my stay in

China and learn more about pu-erh from her. After our time in China, I studied under her for six more months in Los Angeles and then I moved back home to Seattle. My time at the tea shop in Seattle and my apprentice-

TURNING POINT

“If pu-erh is an acquired taste, acquire it.”

ships in China and L.A. were the backbone of my education in pu-erh. I still communicate with that tea master and have also built relationships with local tea connoisseurs and business owners, as well as a few more contacts in California that have really taught me a lot.

Q Pu-erh is an acquired taste for many people. Do you have any suggestions as to preparation techniques for maximum enjoyment?

First of all, find good tea. Pu-erh is commonly produced incorrectly and fraudulently packaged. As one business owner recently conveyed to me in an email, it is a “buyer beware market” and the consumer must be well educated to sift through all that's out there. Second, pu-erh is best brewed in one of the traditional manners, using a gaiwan, or a yixing, ceramic, or porcelain pot. A few hints that work for me:

1. When breaking off leaves from the cake, try to keep the leaves intact. If the leaves are broken, the flavor comes out from the broken pieces too quickly, and the tea becomes murky or astringent.
2. Don't use boiling water as this will scald the tea leaves. A high quality pu-erh, either ripe or raw, can take water up to ten degrees under boiling. Remember, you can always increase the heat of the water, but if you burn it on the first steep, your tea won't release the flavors correctly.
3. Make sure your water is clean. Tap water contains minerals and chlorine that mingle with the flavors of the tea, and will mask the beautiful subtleties of pu-erh.
4. Try shorter steeping times at first, and gradually steep it longer and stronger as you brew. This allows the flavors to come out slowly, not all at once.

5. Keep trying. The first time I made pu-erh on my own it was terrible. It takes practice to learn the best way to extract the beauty of each pu-erh.

For Americans, I feel that the art of tea making is at odds with our culture. We want to “make” tea, that is, we have a preconception about how it should taste, or how we want it to taste, and we try to force it to fit that ideal. However, every tea is different, and even the same tea can change on different days depending on humidity or temperature. It is best to view “making” tea more as a process of allowing the tea to release its potential. This way it is a symbiotic relationship between tea maker and tea. We listen, in a sense, to what the tea is saying, and we make it accordingly. It takes a patient, attentive listener, but it’s well worth it! If pu-erh is an acquired taste, acquire it.

Q In China, Hong Kong, and even North America, a collectors’ market has developed for aged pu-erh, some of which are only few years old, some aged for decades. What’s your take on this?

Well, by definition, pu-erh must be at least somewhat aged or else it’s basically just a compressed green tea made from pu-erh leaves. The point during the aging process when the tea becomes “real pu-erh” is certainly a grey area, so we consider all compressed tea from the broad-leaved tree pu-erh, but unless it has had some time to age, very little secondary oxidation has occurred, which is the property that is unique to pu-erh.

That aside, we must consider the reason for aging in the first place. As previously stated, thousands of years ago, the aging was not intentional but when the pu-erh arrived at its destination, the drinkers were in for a treat. Over time, the flavors, aromas, and overall experience have improved nicely. Much like any aged beverage (e.g., whiskey, wine, or to some degree, artisan beer), aging allows time for flavors to develop that were not initially present.

This is the result of organic molecules like phenols or flavonoids or other such secondary metabolites being produced through either fermentation (in the case of the alcoholic beverages) or secondary oxidation (as in the case of pu-erh). These compounds are not initially present in the tea, but are the product of chemical reactions that take place in the tea.

So, for some tea, as it ages it becomes more flavorful. The astringency of the young leaves fades, and a smooth sweetness emerges. Flavors like plum, citrus, pear, date and blackberry emerge, and bitterness goes away. Only the aged pu-erh contains these flavors, so it makes sense that there would be a market for it. As with other specialty markets, having something rare or very old is almost a sign of status, so that could play a part as well.

People should be aware, however, that tea does not have to be very old to be good. I have had some amazing teas that were only a year or two old, and one of the most amazing teas I have ever tried was only seven years old at the time.

Much more important than age is the quality of the leaf and the care taken during production. Even thirty years of aging can’t hide a bad tea, while a two-month old tea might taste wonderful if the leaves were good to start.

Q How and by whom is pu-erh typically brewed and enjoyed in China?

In China, pu-erh is enjoyed with meals and on its own. Tea is a part of life. It is drunk with meals, with a snack, with friends, while studying, and so on. Pu-erh is the most ancient type of tea and is so interwoven into Chinese culture (at least more traditional culture, and especially in the South), that they can’t be separated. Typically, I saw tea brewed gong-fu style in gaiwans if consumed by itself, or in pots if it went along with food. My experience is biased since I spent the vast majority of my time in Yunnan, but there, this is what I saw.

Everyone drank tea where I went. From farmers that lived in remote villages, to billionaire businessmen, to government officials, tea is the drink that spans all classes. The difference was that on the farms people would drink the astringent tea right off the trees, or that which had only been aged a little bit, while the wealthier locals would enjoy twenty-year old raw and ripe pu-erh pressed by famous tea masters. Still, the brewing methods have been the same for thousands of years.

In Tibet, where the saying is, “It is better to have tea than air,” the indigenous people drink ripe pu-erh throughout the day, every day. It is boiled in a large kettle for long periods of time, and combined with yak butter.

This is slightly different than the traditional Chinese method, but to each his own.

Q What are some of the myths or misconceptions Americans have about pu-erh?

The ones I most frequently encounter are that pu-erh is very hard to find, that it's very expensive, that it's incredibly difficult to discern whether or not it's good, and that it tastes bad. The first is sort of true, if you don't know where to look. Many times people will say something like, "I tried pu-erh and it was gross — I got it at this place in the mall," or something like that. Good pu-erh isn't common but it isn't hard to get. There are a number of very good online retailers that make premium pu-erh available and accessible. Pu-erh quality is fairly difficult to discern if you drink mostly bagged teas, at which point any loose leaf is probably going to be better. But with some time and through trying a few types of tea, a taste for what's good or bad comes naturally.

It's also important to note that tea is personal, if you like it, you like it. Don't worry if the armchair expert the next blog over says the tea is inferior — if it is enjoyable, go ahead and enjoy it. A taste for better and better tea will follow naturally. I've heard many tea people say that pu-erh doesn't taste good. Most of these people are those who commonly drink High Mountain, Ti Kuan Yin or fruity black teas. In comparison to these teas, pu-erh can be bitter or astringent, but if you approach it with an open mind, you'll come to enjoy it.

My advice to those who want to try out pu-erh and find out if the myths are true, rather than going online and researching (which can be good, but only part of the learning matrix), find a group of tea lovers near you and

get together with them. In Seattle there are a number of tea communities that meet regularly and sample teas from all over China, which for a new tea-drinker is an invaluable experience.

If you live somewhere that doesn't have a large tea community, find a sample-pack from a good online retailer and try a wide variety. This way you can experience the many flavors of pu-erh without depleting your checking account.

Q We've experienced pu-erh served in Chinese restaurants in San Francisco accompanied by fried foods; our hosts suggested that the tea helped digestion of heavy meals. Are there any food-pu-erh pairings you'd recommend?

I admit that I have not done much with food pairings, but it does go extremely well with, and after, spicy or greasy foods. I enjoy pu-erh every time I eat hot-pot, or after I eat spicy Sichuan food. Ma Po Tofu and Dehong Wild Pu-erh — there's nothing better.

I suggest trying a tea that you like with a pen in hand and some paper ready. Jot down some tasting notes. How is the nose? What is the aftertaste like? What kind of entry does it have? Is it viscous, thin, lingering, dry, etc.? With these notes, consider what would go well with it. For example, if a tea has a clear taste of freshly cut pear, try it with a fine cheese and some artisan bread. If a wild tea has a lingering aftertaste of coriander and fennel, try it with something savory. My favorite pairing of all time, however, is Bana Tea Company's limited edition cake with Suntory's Hibiki 12-year whisky!