

Hipping Up Pu'er Tea

Curated with a collector's passion, Teaspec is introducing pu'er to a new audience while safeguarding its authenticity

by JENNIFER CHOO



There is an old Chinese proverb that goes: "Tea is better than alcohol. With alcohol, people behave badly but with tea, everyone become elegant and refined in manner."

Indeed the ritualistic aspect of drinking tea has been celebrated for centuries – the process, its implements and accoutrements, and of course, the tea itself. For the aficionado, the most prized of teas is the pu'er, a strong, aromatic brew from the remote south-western province of Yunnan which has long been esteemed in China for its medicinal qualities.

Named for the town that was a centre for its trade in the early 17th century, the tea leaves are dried in the sun, then left to age for weeks, months, years or even decades. The aged value of pu'er tea has the same concept as a well-aged bottle of whisky or wine, and increasingly, similar monetisation – in 2013, a bundle of 2,083g of pu'er tea from the 1900s was auctioned off for a cool US\$1.5mil (RM6.4 mil).

Pu'er that has been stored in Malaysia is now prized by tea connoisseurs as we have the most ideal conditions in the world to store the tea. Our humidity allows the tea to mature differently, creating a better taste and experience compared with the same tea stored elsewhere.

Carole Tan's mother-in-law discovered this firsthand, being a collector of pu'er since the late 1970s. Her large tea collection became the catalyst of Teaspec, Tan's company, which carries a range of teas geared towards introducing tea enthusiasts to the delights and many benefits of pu'er.

"What crystallised my decision to start Teaspec was the realisation that even though many of my friends have been drinking pu'er since they were young, they did not know how to pry or loosen a piece

of compressed pu'er tea, how to properly brew the tea, and have no knowledge of what is raw and ripe pu'er. Amongst them are Chinese families who do not read Chinese. For those who are Chinese educated, their pu'er knowledge may come from the tea shop they buy it from, whose owner may have gained some knowledge about pu'er from his father or grandfather," explains Tan.

"There is no source in the market where proper pu'er knowledge can be learned. Since we're the sole distributor of Xiaguan Tuocha in many countries and therefore have total access to the oldest and most reputable pu'er producer, which no other merchants have, I decided that it was time I acquired the proper knowledge and from a collector's point of view. I wanted to be able to talk about pu'er in a clear and concise manner to the public."

The name Teaspec was chosen because the "spec" suffix (derived from the word "specification") denotes the precise classi-

fication of their teas and Teaspec's desire to set the standard for pu'er and other Chinese tea.

Since it was established in 2015, the Singapore-based company has grown its range of products slowly but deliberately. From the Jade range, an impeccably packaged selection of aged teas that is now sold in Harrods, to the Discovery range, custom blended pu'er discs that will grow more precious with storage, to loose tea canisters of pu'er and pu'er teabags, Teaspec has been true to its mission of bringing the beauty of tea drinking to a wider audience.

In fact, their teaware range even has a Lazy Pour teapot, a glass teapot designed especially for easy brewing and getting the best out of your pu'er. "Most people's impression of pu'er is the dark, mouldy flavoured ones they drink at Chinese restaurants. The opposite is true. I want them to know that there are two categories of pu'er – raw and ripe – and that both have

various vintages."

She adds: "Pu'er has many distinctive flavours and tastes. We recommend they try from different producers as each may have its distinct flavours, aromas, and notes. Most important is also to learn to brew the proper way – for instance, with water heated to 100°C. Steep to taste and do not steep between infusions," advises Tan to all tea neophytes.

With the current surge in popularity of pu'er, there is still a lack of regulation of the market and sufficient knowledge about how to buy or appreciate the precious tea. Teaspec is helping the uninitiated navigate unfamiliar waters with complete confidence by offering only genuine pu'er of the best quality, while at the same time demystifying the tea.

"I give talks and tasting sessions where I explain the basics of pu'er so participants walk away with the knowledge and confidence when they go and buy it. During these talks, the participants get to taste pu'er of different vintages, raw as well as ripe. They will be less intimidated by the array of pu'er tea when they enter a tea shop."

"I've also introduced my Lazy Pour teapot which makes brewing so much easier. The traditional Gong Fu Cha tea set is reserved for the weekends or when you have a lot of time. On regular days, Lazy Pour is best suited for our busy lifestyle. Good tasting tea can be made the convenient way," enthuses Tan.

Two years into the business, it is evident that her passion for tea is what drives Teaspec. "I've learnt so much since starting Teaspec and it has been very enriching while broadening my horizons. Also, seeing people's appreciation of pu'er after the talks gives me great satisfaction." ■



TOP:
The Lazy Pour
teapot for busy
tea lovers

LEFT:
Pu'er tea from
Yunnan