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天
地
人

Tea is born at the confluence
of Heaven, Earth and Man:
climate, terroir and technique.



Anne-Sophie Pic



Laurent Ponsot



The Rise of Tea Pairing

Why do we choose to pair food with tea? What does tea bring to the table? When dining Asian-style, tea often seems to serve the same function as a glass of water: as a thirst-quencher, a palate-cleanser, something to wash our food down with.

This notion is changing, however. What we're seeing today is the ascendancy of tea pairing – the practice of consciously selecting teas to match with food, in a manner that heightens the dining experience. Interestingly, this trend first gained popularity in Europe – as an analogue to wine pairings – and its influence has now spread globally. Many world-renowned chefs are using fine Chinese teas to accompany their meals. Yet the cuisine they prepare is firmly in the European

tradition. Far from being just an everyday beverage, tea takes its place at the table of haute cuisine.

What accounts for the interest in tea pairing? More so than any other partnership in gastronomy, tea and food interact in a way that awakens our senses. When tasting tea, we take time to savour and appreciate it. We become aware of five salient elements in the tea: aroma, sweetness, aftertaste, liveliness and mellowness. As we combine it with food, that awareness expands to take in the aromas and flavours of the food, and the resulting alchemy unfolding on our palates.

In many ways, tea pairing is akin to wine pairing. In Western dining practice, a systematic approach to pairing wines with

meals has been established, together with the emergence of the profession of the sommelier. Standing at your side, a sommelier will advise you on the kind of white wine to accompany your order of fish or fresh oysters. He or she will provide details about the wine, including the flavour profile, the region, the winemaker, and even the ideal vintage. Likewise, when it comes to pairings for meat, the sommelier may recommend a Bordeaux or Burgundy, or perhaps a New World red. This custom sets the stage for a complete dining experience.

Like wine, tea is a kaleidoscope of aroma, flavour, body, aftertaste. Fruity, floral, woody, herbaceous, mineral – all these qualities are found in tea in complex combinations. And like wine, tea is intimately tied to its terroir

– this is a tea's unique *shantouqi*. Just as we can debate the relative merits of Left Bank versus Right Bank Bordeaux, tea connoisseurs recognise differences between teas grown in neighbouring estates, or at different elevations on the same mountain, e.g. Lishan oolong grown at 1,800 metres vs 2,000 metres above sea level. Geography, history, culture and sensual delight are found in a teacup as much as in a wine glass.

The possibilities for tea pairing, whether in Western or Asian dining, are endless. As yet, they have not been systematically analysed. This is where the tea sommelier comes in – to analyse, curate, orchestrate. And a tea sommelier's education necessarily begins with an understanding of tea's varied nature.

Geography, history, culture and sensual delight are found in a teacup as much as in a wineglass.

A Brief History of Tea Feasts

China's tea pairing heritage is perhaps best illustrated through the historical tea feasts, or tea banquets, known as *chayan*.

From as early as the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, tea feasts were used to entertain guests. According to the encyclopedic *Taiping Yulan* (Readings of the Taiping Era), governor Wang Meng of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 AD) was very fond of his tea. As host, he often encouraged copious consumption of tea, to the extent that

his guests started to become afraid of showing up for these tea feasts. Subsequently, each time they received an invitation, they would remark: "A drowning will take place today."

Also during the Eastern Jin, Lu Na served as the prefect of Wuxing. Once when Xie An paid him a visit, Lu served "only tea and fruit". This indicates that at the time, guests were entertained not with large quantities of wine but rather tea and refreshments. Tea feasts were nevertheless grand social events.



Seafood and Green Tea: Perfect Counterpoint

Which teas go well with seafood such as fish, shrimp, crab and shellfish?

The delicate flavour and texture of fish makes it one of the best partners for tea pairing. Wild-caught fish are the most flavoursome and taste very much of the sea. Hence, they should not be paired with teas with too much roasted character. Unfermented or lightly fermented teas are preferred – they have a bright green note that enhances the fresh flavour of fish.

When we partake of a platter of sashimi, we begin with the lighter-coloured fish and then move on to the darker and more strongly flavoured ones. The same is true for tea, where we may start with a light brew before progressing to longer, stronger infusions – a crescendo that takes the tastebuds to ever-higher peaks of enjoyment.

Steamed fish is typically finished with oil, vinegar, spring onion, ginger, garlic – these invariably affect the overall taste of the dish. A suitable tea can reconstitute these flavours, bringing them into delicious harmony. For this purpose, green teas such as Longjing and Biluochun, or a lightly fermented Baozhong, are excellent pairings.

One exception is salmon. As most of the salmon we eat is frozen at source and then thawed before sale or consumption, it

tends to have a slightly rougher, more fibrous texture. This makes it incompatible with green tea. Instead, a lightly roasted tea such as Dongding Oolong makes for a much happier partnership.

Alternatively, try a Japanese bancha. These are second-flush green teas which are harvested after the leaf buds have already been picked; the next available leaves are harvested, and the stalks removed. These leaves are then lightly pan-roasted, resulting in a mellower tea with a golden-brown infusion and a more earthy character than sencha. Bancha highlights the woody notes in salmon – this is a fine example of coexisting tastes complementing each other.

Shrimp, crab and crustaceans, when simply seasoned and grilled, are best paired with lightly fermented teas like white or green teas. These should be brewed lightly so that they do not overshadow the delicate freshness of the seafood. When the seafood is cooked in stronger-flavoured dishes, for instance a thick sauce or a Thai curry, select a tea with a bit of natural sweetness, such as jassid-bitten Oriental Beauty or a black tea made with tender leaf buds.

Shellfish like oysters, mussels and clams are conventionally paired with white wine. A classic combination is oysters accompanied



by a crisp, minerally white that complements their briny flavour. For a tea pairing, consider a Baozhong or green tea, whose verdant notes share a surprising harmony with shellfish.

Scallops warrant a special mention. I have found them to pair ideally with lightly fermented teas such as a white tea in

season. The tea tastes slightly sweet but isn't overbearingly fragrant. When sipped between bites of scallop (carefully cooked so that the centre is still soft), the white tea not only doesn't steal the show, but brings out the best in the scallop, and vice versa.



Cheese with Pu'er

Red wine is usually the default choice for cheese pairing. Tea, however, holds a lot of untapped potential as a partner for cheese. A professional tea sommelier would be able to systematically look into the hundreds of cheeses out there – from soft to hard, from cow's milk to goat milk, and the blue cheeses that are not for the faint-hearted – and match them each with the perfect tea.

But if there is one tea that pairs beautifully with virtually any cheese, it has to be sun-dried raw Pu'er. This remarkable tea is harvested from large tea trees, and consequently possesses a deep woody undertone. When sipped after a bite of cheese, it renders the cheese immeasurably richer and smoother in flavour.

Raw Pu'er comes into its element with goat cheese and hard sheep's cheese, both of which have a pungent gamey aroma – which some love but others find too strong. This tea highlights the delectable savouriness of these cheeses, while at the same time tempering their smell.

For soft cheeses, too, such as Brie, Camembert and Saint Marcellin, sun-dried Pu'er is an ideal pairing – but brew it on the lighter side so as not to overwhelm the flavour of these comparatively milder cheeses.

The hard cheese known as Parmesan (full name: Parmigiano-Reggiano), which has myriad applications in cooking, can also be simply served with fresh fruits, dried fruits, or just a few drops of aged balsamic vinegar. A matching tea should be a little more roasted and fermented, making Taiwanese oolongs an ideal candidate. The Parmesan's saltiness transforms into a fruity sweetness due to the presence of tea tannins.

Finally we come to the blue cheeses – Roquefort, Gorgonzola and their like. Green teas are sometimes recommended as a good pairing, but I find that they are invariably overpowered by the robust flavour of blue cheese. Consider instead a Wodui Pu'er, which is a *ripe* rather than *raw* Pu'er. It will take the sharp edge off the cheese, rounding and balancing the overall flavour profile.

Tea with Dim Sum: Not Just Pu'er or Jasmine

We are at Le Palais in central Taipei, a three-star Michelin restaurant (the first and only three-star in Taiwan) that serves superlative Cantonese cuisine. To open the tea banquet, dim sum is served: crystalline dumplings filled with jade-green Chinese spinach, golden flecks of salted egg and fragrant ham-infused broth; sweetly savory pan-fried radish cake with minced Chinese sausage; and Hong

Kong-style baked buns filled with *char siu*, or barbecued pork.

Faced with such delicacies, how could we simply fall back on the default pot of Pu'er or jasmine tea? An organic Taiwanese oolong is arranged for. What a revelation for the tastebuds! With its clean, light nose and smooth body, the tea not only lifts the flavours of the dim sum, but relieves the

THE 6 MAJOR TEA TYPES

OO LONG TEA

The term that best corresponds to the very broad category of semi-fermented teas is qing tea (青茶 *qingcha*). Qing teas comprise varieties such as Wuyi tea and Tieguanyin from Fujian, Fenghuang Shuixian from Guangdong, and Oolong tea from Taiwan, among many others. In this taxonomy, we see that Oolong tea is in fact a subset of qing tea. However, in common parlance, “Oolong” has effectively become the umbrella term for the category, and is now used fairly interchangeably with “qing tea”.

Semi-fermented tea is the most representative tea type in China – and the most diverse. The varying degrees of semi-fermentation, combined with the tea maker's kneading and roasting technique, give rise to

a astonishing array of regional differences and artisanal peculiarities.

A key step in qing tea production is intentionally bruising the tea leaves after withering. This is done by tossing or shaking them on a tray, and results in the acceleration of fermentation. If you have noticed that infused Oolong leaves are green with red edges – this is the tell-tale result of friction from the tossing process. When combined with roasting (whether over charcoal or by machine), the raw, grassy notes and tannins in the tea leaves are transformed into a distinctive taste and aroma.

Let us look at several representative qing teas, their production processes and characteristics.







About the Author

Tea Parker (Chih Jung-sien) is Taiwan's foremost authority on tea, having written more than 40 books for the Chinese-language market. He appears regularly in the media, conducts classes, and consults with restaurants on their tea programmes. He has presented talks and demonstrations on all aspects of tea culture in Europe, the U.S. and Japan, and is the founder of the International Tea Sommelier Academy (ITSA). In the tea world, he is known as Tea Parker, an allusion to Robert Parker, the world's authority on wine who developed the now-ubiquitous 100-point scoring system. This is Tea Parker's first book to be translated into English.

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