



Withering tea leaves at tea estate in Sri Lanka taken by Danielle Beaudette. (c)

BY DANIELLE BEAUDETTE

and a bud, placing them in bamboo baskets or in plastic aerated sacks. These top three leaves are the newest shoots and produce the healthiest and best tasting teas.

The Sorting and Weighing: The tea leaves are carried to the weighing stations where they are sorted on widespread plastic sheets and then weighed. From here, the leaves are brought by truckload down to the factory.

Withering: The tea leaves are spread out on screens in long 'withering troughs' about 4 inches deep. Air is blown under them, while the tea leaves on top are being constantly turned over to promote the drying (withering) of the leaf. This 12-15 hour process reduces about 50% of the moisture, making the leaf flexible and limp.

From here, the process changes depending on the type of tea. White teas are sent through a firing process to immediately keep any oxidation from occurring. This completes the White tea processing. Green teas from China are pan-fired while the green teas from Japan are steamed which stops the oxidation of the leaf, allowing it to keep its green color. The leaves are then rolled and shaped, sometimes by hand or more commonly by machine.

Oolong teas are shaken or rolled in baskets to bruise the leaf edges, allowing the essential oils to be released. They are oxidized (laid out in temperature-controlled rooms exposed to the air) for a specific amount of time producing lower oxidized/greener oolongs and higher oxidized/

darker oolongs. They are then pan-fired and dried to stop the oxidation process.

Black teas undergo a rolling or cutting process and are then sorted on a series of different screens and separated into evenly sized grades. They undergo a full oxidation process which can be anywhere between 30 minutes to 8 hours, with each time producing different flavor profiles, aromas and caffeine content in the tea. When the tea expert feels the exact aroma has been reached, the tea is fired to stop oxidation. The Estate Manager will then determine through a cupping process whether the leaves are perfect enough to leave his factory. After production, the leaves are packed in vacuum-sealed bags and transported to the auction centers, where the tea importers bring them to your favorite local tea shops for you to appreciate.

We enjoy this incredible brew on a daily basis, but do you really know how the leaf gets from the field to the cup? The story of tea has been clad in mystery, since it was first discovered around 5000 years ago. Emperor Shen Nong, while scouting the far reaching lands of China for medicinal herbs, came upon the tea leaf that just happened to fall directly in his cup of boiling water. His curiosity and delight in the taste of the brew led to the cultivation of the tea plant *Camellia sinensis*.

This plant is indigenous to China; however, it is grown and harvested in temperate climates all over the world. Many are surprised to hear that the tastes, textures and aromas of the different varieties of tea all come from the same plant. What gives us these qualities is the unique terrain, climate, culture, and taste preferences that each country offers. However, the magic begins to happen beginning with the cultivation and ending with the processing of the leaf.

The Plucking of the Leaf: The tea pluckers rise in the early morning hours. They work incredibly hard, plucking by hand the top two leaves

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