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## Two tea masters of black arts

By Tan Weiyun | September 9, 2012, Sunday |  PRINT EDITION



Image of article "Two tea masters of black arts"

MIN Xuanwen spoons a small amount of Keemun black tea leaves into an exquisite, white porcelain cup, and then adds boiling water, as the tea leaves bob up and down. A fruity, smoky fragrance arises. Min waits motionless for five minutes until the aroma becomes mellow and then pours the tea water into a tiny cup.

"Sniff directly from the cup to feel the fruity fragrance, you can smell the aroma mixed with pine, orchid, dried plum and sweet, smoky rose. The fragrance lingers," he said. "Then taste the tea and you'll sense a little sweetness that also lingers."

Eighty-one-year-old Min is the ultimate authority, the last word in Keemun black tea and he is well-renowned in the industry. Having selected, sifted, processed, tasted and judged the "king of black teas" for more than 60 years, Min has the final say at the famous old Keemun Black Tea Factory on which batch of tea receives the highest premium rating and label, and, hence, is sold for the highest price. It can sell for as much as 10,000 yuan (US\$1,576) for 500 grams.

And his student, 51-year-old Lu Guofu is taking over to make the finest teas.

Since 1985, virtually all the Keemun black teas that won prizes in China and overseas have been collected, processed and blended by Lu and Min, including the gold medal on the 26th World's Finest Foods Selection in Brussels in 1987.

These two experts play the key roles in setting the National Keemun Black Tea Standard.

Masters of 'king of black teas'

If it were not for its black tea, Keemun (Qimen), a small quiet county hidden in the southeast tip of Anhui Province, would be probably remain obscure, eclipsed by its nearby famous neighbor, Huangshan or Yellow Mountain.

But fortunately for tea drinkers, a young civil servant Hu Yuanlong lost his job in the 1870s and in shame decided to learn a skill, traveling to Fujian Province to learn how to make black tea. He returned to Anhui, where only green tea had been grown, and opened three factories producing black tea in Keemun in 1875.

The result was a tea marvel with fruity fragrance with hints of pine, orchid, dried plum, wine and sweet, smoky rose. It may be a bit toasty and nutty. It's subtle, complex, mellow and sweet.

That tea put Keemun on the map. It was the daily beverage of the England's royal families and it remains the key ingredient in English breakfast tea. It is considered one of China's great teas and is often presented as a state gift to visiting dignitaries.

Today the traditions are carried on at the Keemun Black Tea Factory in Tafang Village by master Min and "student" Lu.

Selecting, sorting, sifting, processing, blending the tea is an art, a complicated, traditional 14-step process strictly observed, involving senses of sight, smell, touch and taste. Keemun has up to 10 grades and is evaluated according to many criteria, including the size and shape of tea leaf, its integrity, color, presence of buds, consistency, aroma (complex), taste (complex), color of tea water, color and appearance of brewed tea leaves.

"My life is tightly bonded with the tea," Min told Shanghai Daily in an interview. "I cannot imagine what else I could do without black tea."

The Zhejiang native became attached to the Keemun tea in 1950 when he was an 18-year-old tea student in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. He took a training trip to Keemun for quality inspection. After the training, Min stayed on.

Since 1953, every tea season from May to October, Min has visited the vast tea farms in Keemun. He studied black tea-making, brewing, tasting and judging skills from old factory workers as well as an old textbook left by experts Wu Juenong and Hu Haochuan during the early 1900s.

In 1960, the old Keemun Black Tea Factory, one of the original makers, imported equipment from the Soviet Union. Min was the first to master the mechanics of producing black tea. Machines can shake, sift and sort, but they judge a good cup of tea and the human touch is ever present.

Since the 1970s, the black tea has been exported to more than 50 countries.

Then Lu graduated from an Anhui tea school and followed master Min.

"I still remember the days when I was making tea for more than 10 hours a day in the studio filled with snap of tea leaves flying all around," Lu recalled. "If you ever stood in a sultry, stuffy room for a whole day, you would know a mask is totally useless."

Lu is the deputy general manager of the Keemun Black Tea Industry Co Ltd, invested by a Hangzhou holdings group two years ago.

For a century, few Chinese knew about Keemun black tea because more than 96 percent was exported or sent to directly to Zhongnanhai,

the government compound in Beijing for China's senior leaders.

Min and Lu made the black tea for Lady Thatcher during her visit to China in 1982 and also prepared the tea as a state gift during former president Jiang Zemin's visit to the Soviet Union in 1990.

"As a matter of fact, we didn't know who we were making tea for. We were just doing our jobs and trying to do them well," Min said.

Today 60-70 percent of all Keemun tea is exported, which slightly slips from the record high of 90 percent due to the increasing domestic demand.

In remote, mountainous and misty Qimen County, more than 200 tea factories produce around 3,000 tons of semi-finished or dried Keemun black tea leaves a year. The output value last year was more than 200 million yuan (US\$31.4 million). The climate is mild and rainy and the humidity is high; the soil is sandy and well-drained, ideal for tea. The county is covered by more than 10,600 hectares of tea gardens and almost every farmer grows tea in his backyard.

#### Intangible cultural heritage

"The unique climate creates an excellent natural environment for tea growing," Lu said. The Anhui native has been making Keemun tea for almost 30 years, starting as a technician when he was 22 and learning the artisanal skills of hand-made tea. He started at the old Keemun Black Tea Factory, where he eventually became deputy director.

The process of making Keemun tea is considered a part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

China's Keemun, India's Darjeeling and Sri Lanka's Ceylon are widely considered the best three black teas with strong fragrance. Keemun is especially fruity but less floral than Darjeeling and tops the list, in Lu's opinion.

He explains that Keemun comes from a special cultivar, a plant variety produced through selective breeding and known as Zhu Ye Zhong. These are the only kind of tea leaves containing myrcenol, an essential oil with high enzyme activity and one of the compounds in lavender oil fragrance. It also contains geraniol, one of the main aromatic elements in rose oil and Javanese citronella; it contains 40 to 100 times more geraniol than other teas. It's rich in theanine, making it mellow, long-lasting and non-astringent.

"The two elements myrcenol and geraniol, to a large extent, give Keemun tea indescribable sweetness and aroma like a dried rose," Lu said. "But what most makes the tea special are the century-old hand-making skills."

It usually takes at least five years to learn the set of manual skills to make black tea "and probably another decade to completely master the skills," he said.

Then, of course, there are skills of visual appraisal, touching, tasting and smelling. It takes many years of experience to determine which combinations of which kind of leaves, buds and sprouts make for the best taste and aroma.

The Keemun Black Tea Factory in Tafang Village contains three big work areas for producing gross tea, refined tea and packaging. Leaves are picked in the early spring and dried, and then processed and dried further in summer.

The best tea leaves have one bud, one leaf and a second leaf about to

open - these are the freshest and tenderest from the tip of a branch. These usually produce the highest-level tea. The best of the best is "two buds with one leaf," but this is extremely rare.

A bag dried, unrefined tea contains tightly curled dark leaves and golden sprouts. In general, the more sprouts, the better the tea, but if there are too few leaves, the tea loses its fruity fragrance, mellow taste and dark colored tea water. Balance is the key.

"A good cup of Keemun black tea depends entirely on the handcrafting skills of the master who produces it," Lu said. "It retains the leaves' shape and color and the unspoiled sprouts."

"It should take 14 steps, not including packaging," master Min said. "But many tea traders brag about 13 steps, I'm not sure which one they skip."

He still reads from his old tea textbook "bible" setting out each step of tea production, from how to pick to how to package tea.

"I often read a page or two if I have time, and it's amazing that I can always get something new from the book," Min said.

"We still stick to the procedures today and still use the old-type equipment," Min said.

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