# Traditional Jasmine Tea from Fujian Province, China:

## Ethereal Cups of Sublime Tea Drinking Pleasure

● By Mary Lou Heiss

**PROFILE**

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For me, there is no more splendid aroma than the rich, luxurious fragrance of jasmine blossoms (family: Oleaceae, genus: Jasminum). On a recent trip to a botanical garden I discovered that I had arrived at the perfect time. The various species of resident jasmine vines were in full bloom, and I was thrilled to be surrounded by such a concentration of this heady and exotic aroma. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply, and let the transcendent fragrance conjure up dreamy images of exotic places and warm sultry nights.

As I left the garden drunk on these exhilarating aromas, I began to mentally relive the visit I made last year to a traditional jasmine tea factory in Fujian Province, China. There, the pervasive fragrance of jasmine blossoms dominates the area during the hot and humid summer, and the gentlest breeze carries the lingering aroma of these blossoms great distances.

China's long and impressive list of exceptional teas is comprised of thousands of variations of leaf styles in six classes of tea —black, green, oolong, puerh, white and yellow. Flower scented teas such as jasmine have been enjoyed in China for centuries, and delicious examples of these seductive teas can be found in several of these different classes of tea.

Historically, different classes of tea became associated with specific tea producing regions, and within each class of tea many special teas developed. Many of China's revered teas still exist today—some of these teas are known as the 'Famous Teas' while others are more familiar to local populations of tea drinkers on a regional basis. Nevertheless, each of these teas

reflects regional taste preferences and local tea making traditions in these regions.

Since the tumultuous days of the China Tea Trade in the 18th century, the West has embraced many Chinese teas, but one of the perennial favorites is China's heady and exotic flower-scented teas. The process of imbuing the lush, sweet perfume of aromatic blossoms to tea leaves was perfected during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). In the earlier Tang Dynasty (618-907) compressed tea cakes were flavored with sweet fruit pastes and sometimes flower oils, but the addition of fresh blossoms to leaf tea belongs to the flower-loving cult of Ming-era tea processors. Since that time the addition of the glorious perfume of fresh chrysanthemum, gardenia, jasmine, osmanthus, rose, and *yulan* (magnolia) blossoms has provided moments of delight to the relaxing pleasure of tea drinking.

Flamboyant and sweet-tempered jasmine tea is the primary jewel in the crown of China's scented teas, and in the north of China one is most likely to be served a cup of jasmine tea before or after a meal. Serving jasmine tea to guests is considered a sign of hospitality and welcome.

There are many quality grades of jasmine tea, determined by the fineness of the leaf pluck, the freshness and condition of the jasmine blossoms used and the number of times fresh jasmine blossoms are introduced to the prepared base tea. Different quality levels of jasmine tea are manufactured and range from the sophisticated and sublime to the mundane and cloying.

China is a vast country and many tea-producing provinces cultivate jasmine flowers and manufacture jasmine tea. These include Fujian, Guangdong, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Zhejiang provinces. As with any

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commodity, standardization and uniformity of product produces common, undistinguished tea. Much of the lowest quality jasmine tea is made for general consumption and for use in Chinese restaurants both in China and the west. These teas use summer-harvest pluck (which is larger and coarser leaf) and are given only one or two scentings with fresh blossoms. Even worse, these inexpensive jasmine teas are often 'scented' in tea factories by simply spraying tea leaf (of whatever origin and class of tea) with jasmine extract.

But all Chinese teas have one special place where they are best understood and interpreted, and, accordingly, traditionally scented jasmine tea is historically linked to Fujian Province in eastern China. Here, jasmine tea has always been the specialty of tea factories located in the vicinity of Changle, on the outskirts of Fuzhou city. Fortunately for today's tea aficionados, skilled tea workers in small local tea factories located there take pride in their artisan grades of specialty jasmine tea and still follow the required steps of traditional jasmine tea manufacture to scent their exquisite teas.

When you experience just one taste of the delicate flavors and intoxicating aromas of these traditional jasmine teas you will appreciate the difference. I like to think that Ming-era tea lovers would be delighted to know that these teas are still being made today.

Since the days of the China Tea Trade, Fujian has been a treasure trove of key Chinese teas such as the broad-leafed, pine-smoked *Lapsang Souchong*, the revered Wuyi *Si Da Ming* Cong Cliff Oolongs such as *Da Hong Pao* and *Ti Lo Han*, traditional varieties of bud-set white tea and the ball-rolled *Tieguanyin* (Iron Goddess of Mercy) oolongs teas. Fujian jasmine teas are highly regarded not only for the quality of the leaf but also for the ethereal quality of the fresh jasmine blossoms (*Arabian Jasmine Sambac*) that are cultivated on jasmine bushes grown in the environs of the tea factories.

In Fujian Province, leaf from several different bush varieties of *Camilla Sinensis* is plucked to make various styles of jasmine tea. This includes leaf from white tea varietals

such as *Fuding Da Bai* (Fuding Big White) and *Fuding Da Hao* (Fuding Big Sprout), which hail from the vicinity of the town of Fuding. This leaf is used to make white jasmine teas such as the long, downy-hair covered bud-only Silver Needles jasmine (*Bai Hao Yin Zhen*), and Jasmine Dragon Pearls, a leaf and bud-set white tea that is made from the *Fuding Da Bai* varietal. Jasmine Dragon Pearls requires the use of this slightly larger leaf, so that workers can successfully hand-roll the leaf into a finished 'pearl.'

However, these teas are the exception. The base tea used for most Fujian jasmine tea is special. Jasmine tea is often referred to as being green or white or oolong tea, but, while some specific varieties are made from white tea, most Fujian jasmine tea such as Jasmine Silver Hair (*Yin Hao Jasmine*) and Jasmine Spring *Hao Ya* are made from a base tea that it is similar to all of these but different from them. Correctly, this tea is *Pouchong* tea (not to be confused with *Baozhong* or *Paochong* oolongs from Taiwan which are true oolongs that have been given a light oxidization and which possess a visually different leaf style). Every province that manufactures jasmine tea will use a different base depending on preferences of the local population, so in some places in China black tea is used.

*Pouchong* is best understood as a very lightly oxidized tea that is not bruised as in traditional oolong manufacture but is de-enzymed as in green tea manufacture. With the exception of the preference by locals in Fujian for drinking pouchong as finished tea, *Pouchong* tea is made solely for use in flower scented teas.

Jasmine tea is a two-step process that begins in the spring and is finished in mid to late summer. The tea is made from freshly plucked spring leaf but jasmine bushes flower on a different cycle and do not produce their famous blossoms until the sweltering, hot and humid days of late July.

Because of this offset in the timing of production, the base tea must be made ahead of time and packed up to await the arrival of the aromatic flower blossoms. When the time is right for the blossoms and the tea to be 'married' the base tea must be such that it is able to absorb the perfume of the jasmine blossoms as completely as possible into every pore of every leaf. And this ability is controlled by the nature of the base tea.

This base tea is called *zao pei* (tea readied). *Zao pei* is made by first de-enzyming the fresh leaf, then by rolling the leaf to break up the cell structure within the leaf. The leaf is then quickly dried with indirect heat from hot air that is blown over the leaf as it travels through a drying machine. This creates a very different leaf style than leaf that is dried by direct-heat methods such as pan-firing or basket firing. These traditional techniques of drying would expose the leaf to heat that is too hot and the leaf would curl and twist; the object in creating *zao pei* is to keep the leaf somewhat straight and flat in order to retain the maximum amount of surface area for absorbing the fragrance from the blossoms.

At this stage the *zao pei* will be stored in the tea factory until the time that the jasmine blossoms are ready to be introduced to it. Being slightly oxidized, *zao pei* stores well during this resting period. The tea waits until the jasmine blossoms are ripe for plucking; this task is carried out in the early afternoon, after the threat of any residual dew on the blossoms has vanished. Jasmine blossoms respond to heat and cool—the blossoms remain closed until the build-up of the day's heat encourages them to open at night.

Starting around noontime, workers begin plucking the tightly closed blossoms, and continue plucking throughout the afternoon. Pluckers evaluate which blossoms to pluck based on color (blossoms should be white, not ivory) and by the length of the shaft from the base of the blossom to where it is attached to the bush. As with freshly plucked leaf, the blossoms are taken to a collection point where they are bagged for their journey to the tea factory. For the best aroma, it is essential that the blossoms travel from the collection point to the factory within a few hours of being picked.

By 4:00 PM the blossoms arrive at the tea factory, where the bags will be emptied and the blossoms spread out in a room that has a temperature maintained at 38-40°C (100-104 °F). Here, the heat will encourage the flowers to open. The goal is to have the flowers open just halfway, the point at which the workers can see the center of the blossom. Flowers are sifted and any that have not opened are discarded.

To accommodate the opening of the flowers, the actual scenting of the *zao pei* occurs overnight. Around 8:00 PM the blossoms are introduced and mixed with the *zao pei* and then rested for a short period. Depending on the quality of tea being made, as much as 10 pounds of flowers is used for every one pound of *zao pei*. Following this, the flowers and the leaf are raked into a heap where they will mingle for about 6 hours. It is here that the scenting begins, as the moisture in the blossoms raises the temperature in the heap to 40-45°C (104-113°F).

This is the ideal environment for the leaf to absorb the jasmine scent. The scenting process is actually a transfer of the fragrance from the moisture-filled blossoms into the moisture-reduced *zao pei* . The size of the heap is critical to the heat buildup and for the fragrance transfer to occur—the heap must be neither too small nor too large, and it must take into consideration the ambient temperature of the room. If the internal temperature of the heap is not perfect the perfume of the blossoms will not be properly absorbed by the *zao pei*, and if the temperature becomes too hot, a bad flavor will develop. It is in these heaps that the *zao pei*, exposed to a buildup of heat, slightly oxidizes during the lengthy process of absorbing the flower scent.

Around 1:00-2:00 AM the heap is flattened, spread out, rested, and heaped again. The blossoms and the *zao pei* will be allowed to 'marry' again in the second heap for an

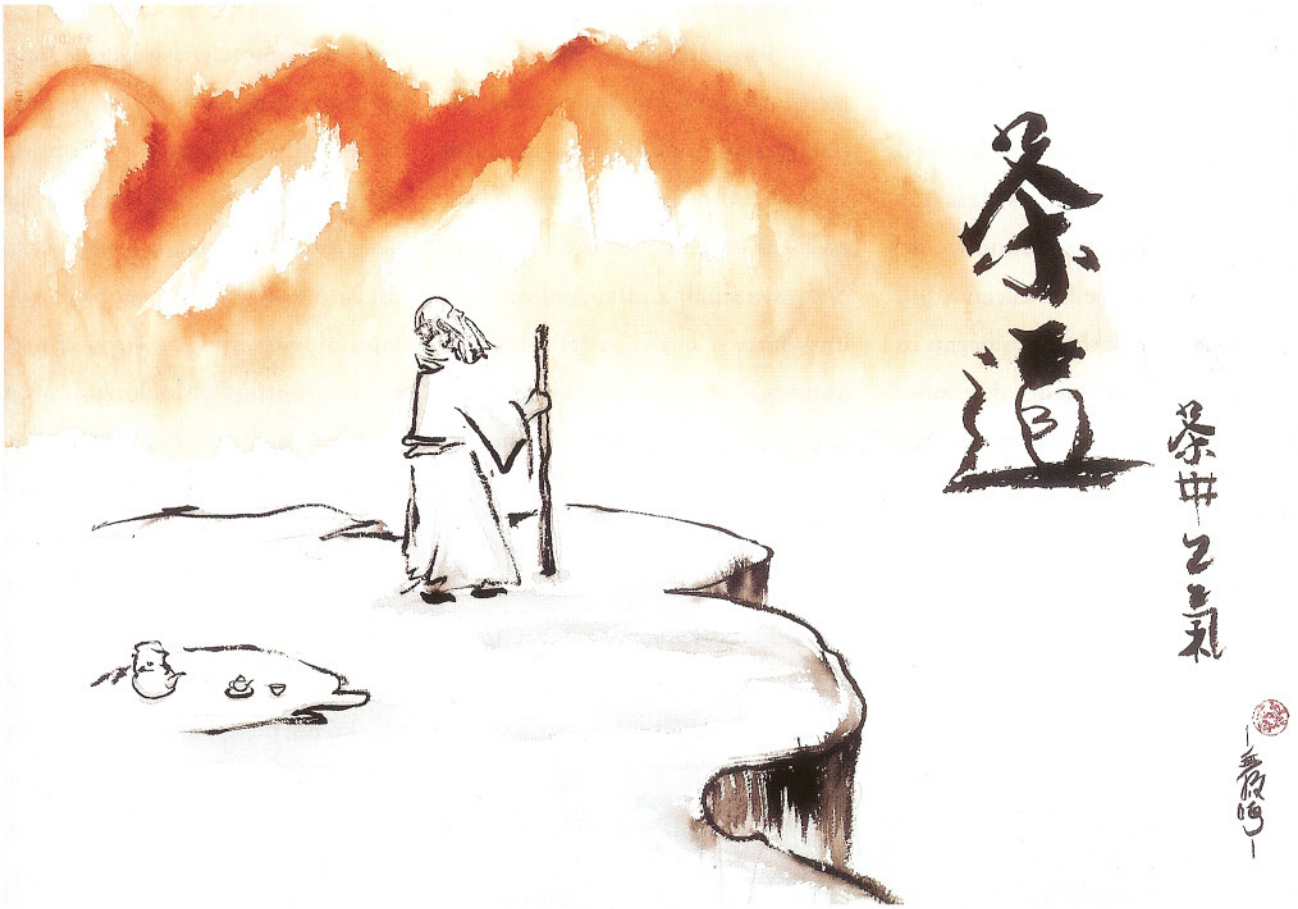
additional 4-6 hours. When the heap is flattened and spread out in the early morning, the blossoms will be removed by sifting the tea through bamboo sieves. The spent blossoms will be discarded and the *zao pei* will rest until the second round of scenting begins.

The first scenting is the most critical, as the *zao pei* must absorb as much fragrance as possible in this first introduction. Further inductions of blossoms will follow—as many as 9 subsequent scentings are given to the highest grades of jasmine tea, which is called high scenting; lesser grades of tea will be given 4 to 5 scentings, and the most common teas, only one or two scentings. But, the *zao pei* must be cooled and rested in between scentings—the manufacture of *Yin Hao* jasmine requires close to a month to complete.

Each additional time that a batch of tea is scented, fewer blossoms are used, the temperature in the heap is reduced and the time of 'marrying' lessens. When the tea is finished, the moisture content will have increased about 15% and the tea will need to have a final firing to stabilize the leaf. After this, some jasmine teas are given a final scenting to coat the surface of the leaf with an additional layer of perfume and to 'lock in' the inner fragrance.

For export tea, jasmine blossoms are added for 'looks' more than for establishing aroma. Most Chinese tea drinkers (except for those in Sichuan and Beijing and the areas north of Beijing) do not like added flowers in their jasmine tea. Because of the length of time it takes to repeatedly scent the highest grades of jasmine tea, the newly manufactured teas do not usually become available in the marketplace until October or November each year.

Thanks to the dedicated artisan tea workers in Fujian, today's tea connoisseurs can experience several exciting choices in jasmine tea.




around looking for answers? He liked thinking they had. Like him, had they too sought out one teacher after another? And questions that only released thousands more in turn? Had they really found all the answers? Were their clothes also tattered from sleeping outdoors? Maybe none of that mattered. His questions did, though. He again began pondering what he would ask when he got to the top. He was rehearsing. He knew that dramatizing the future or past wasn't becoming of a seeker. One should live in the present. He'd learned all that long ago, but he still loved making up questions. Like poetry, they are. And besides, these were the wisest men around, so his questions had to be perfect. He might only have one chance, and he'd spent a long, rambling life waiting for it.

That night he slept in a small cave he found halfway up the mountain. The fog had rolled off around dusk and the night sky shown like a diamond palace he'd once dreamt. There were a few times, when he had stopped to wipe the sweat from his dirty brow, that he'd wondered why teachers always lived up in the mountains. Then, he'd thought it was to keep away from people like him. That had made him smile and start walking again. Now he wasn't so sure, though. The air was clearer. the stars closer, and the breeze quieter. Maybe they just liked it up here? Or better yet, maybe they too had come down long roads like him? Vowing not to stop until they felt fulfilled? Maybe this openness was a part of that fulfillment? He wrapped his robes about him and leaned back against the small cave wall. He thought about the animals that had all lived in there over time. Their lives. Their journeys without question, almost pulled or led. How unfortunate. He loved his journey. He loved the