

Classic China Oolong and The Three Daughters of Taiwan

An article by [Daniel Reid](#)

Oolong is the reigning emperor of tea in Taiwan, where it has become known as "High Mountain Oolong" or simply "High Mountain Tea" (gao shan cha), to distinguish it from the oolong grown in China. While the pedigree of all oolong teas may be traced back to their original roots in the Wu Yi mountains of China, a florid brood of oolong offspring has been spawned over the past three centuries in the lush green mountains of Taiwan, or "Isla Formosa" (the "Beautiful Island," as early Portuguese visitors named it). The identity, character, and precise lineage of the High Mountain Oolong Teas grown in Taiwan is a topic of hot debate, conflicting opinion, and outright inaccuracy among cha ren ("tea people") in Taiwan today, but there are a few fundamental facts which remain beyond dispute and may therefore serve as reliable guidelines in sorting out the "Who's Who" and "What's What" in the extended, ever expanding family of beautiful daughters in the world of High Mountain Oolong Tea in Taiwan.

Oolong tea in Taiwan may be broadly divided into four major branches: the Classic China Oolong varieties brought to Taiwan from the mainland; and the three unique hybrids bred in Taiwan from China Oolong genetic stock and known today as "The Three Daughters of Taiwan," namely Jin Xuan ("Golden Lily"), Tsui Yu ("Kingfisher Jade"), and Se Ji Chun ("Four Seasons Spring").

Basically, the Classic China Oolongs tend to display a more mature, earthy character and a smokey, woody taste, while their indigenous Taiwan offspring--the beautiful, seductive "Three Daughters"--are most famous for their fresh young flavor, rich floral fragrance, and brisk fruity tang.

Let's take a brief look at the basic nature and unique attributes of each of these four branches of the Taiwan Tea Tree:

Classic China Oolong

Centuries ago, when the oolong variety of tea was first cultivated in the Wu Yi mountains of central China, planters noticed that a particular kind of black snake liked to make its home in the oolong tea bush. Since snakes are often referred to in Chinese as "little dragons," the tea harvested from this type of bush became known as "oo-lung," which means "Black Dragon."

Dozens of varieties were developed in China from the original oolong tea lineage, each with its own distinctive character, flavor, and fragrance. All of them are produced with the two basic techniques which distinguish oolong tea production: a short period of oxidation immediately after the leaves are picked; and a long, meticulous process of "firing" (baking) the oxidised leaves in order to dry them slowly and evenly for storage and shipment. Not all oolong teas are rolled into tightly coiled pellets before firing. A few of the more delicate varieties, such as Bao Jung, Tie Guan Yin, and Dung-fang Meiren, are baked and dried with their leaves unfurled.

When the Manchus swept down from the north and conquered China in 1644, waves of Chinese migrants came to Taiwan to escape the chaos of dynastic change on the mainland, and with them they brought the basic elements of Chinese civilization, including their indispensable tea. ("Better to go three days without food than one day without tea," states an old Chinese adage). The oolong tea plants they carried to Taiwan thrived on the lush green island, especially in the central highlands, where mineral-rich ocean mist from the surrounding seas mingles with dense mountain fog to infuse the leaves with the unique qualities for which Taiwan's oolong teas have become so well known. Today about half a dozen varieties of Classic China Oolong originally developed on the mainland are still produced in Taiwan. The distinctive hybrids bred later in Taiwan from Classic China Oolong stock and known today as "The Three Daughters of Taiwan" are the varieties that have made Taiwan famous for tea, and it is these unique oolong strains that are generally referred to today as "High Mountain Tea" (gao shan cha).

First, let's take a look at some of the Classic China Oolong teas that are still cultivated in Taiwan:

Ching Shin Oolong ("Tender Heart" Oolong)

This is the type of Classic China Oolong produced most abundantly in Taiwan. Lightly oxidised, hand rolled, and delicately fired, Tender Heart Oolong has a very refreshing young flavor, a green leafy aroma, and a light yellow-green color. It's called "Tender Heart" because the leaves come only from the first pluck, when they are still tender and the heart of each leaf cluster is still in bud.

Da Yeh Oolong ("Big Leaf" Oolong)

This is a relatively rare variety of oolong distinguished by a leaf that is almost the size of a man's hand when picked. Also known as "Buddha Palm," Big Leaf Oolong is often blended with other varieties by tea masters in Taiwan in order to produce a particular taste and aroma, much like whisky blenders in Scotland combine different malts to create the unique taste of various whiskies.

Tie Guan Yin ("Iron Goddess of Mercy")

One of China's most famous teas, Tie Guan Yin is named after China's most beloved Buddhist deity, Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It is said that this tea was first discovered growing near the ruins of an ancient hermitage in which there stood an iron statue of Guan Yin, hence the name "Iron Guan Yin."

This is one of the original Classic Oolongs brought to Taiwan from China, and one of the most difficult to produce properly. It requires a much longer firing process than other varieties of oolong, and only traditional charcoal may be used to heat the oven, because the fumes play a central role in developing the unique smokey flavor of Tie Guan Yin. Highly aromatic, with a rich malty flavor and deep reddish color, Tie Guan Yin was the favorite tea of the great sinologist and Buddhist writer John Blofeld, author of "The Chinese Art of Tea" as well as a wonderful book about Guan Yin herself entitled "Bodhisattva of Compassion."

Dung-fang Mei-ren ("Oriental Beauty")

This legendary and rarest of all oolongs was the favorite tea of Queen Victoria, who gave it its beautiful name. Oriental Beauty has a fragrance, flavor, and color like no other oolong, and it's very difficult to find. That's because this tea depends entirely on the fickle whims of a particular flying insect which--when and if it comes--lands on the leaves and crawls slowly around the edges, gently nibbling and sucking up something it likes from the tea plant, without doing any damage to the leaves. During the insect's brief visit, its saliva combines with some compounds in the leaves, leaving a dry white fuzz around the edges, and this is what creates Oriental Beauty's unique taste and aroma. It also guarantees that all Oriental Beauty is 100% organically grown, because if any pesticides are applied to the plants, the precious insect will "bug off" and go elsewhere.

[Oriental Beauty](#) is available for purchase from our website.

Lao Oolong ("Aged" Oolong)

Some of the more mature oolong teas are kept stored for many years in large clay urns in order to let them slowly season, like old wine in an oak barrel. This produces a tea with a strong, robust flavor, a dry aftertaste, and a deep red color in the cup. The leaves used for Aged Oolong must be fully mature when picked, then oxidised longer than other oolongs and well fired to insure that the tea is sufficiently sturdy and dry to withstand the long aging process.

"The Three Daughters of Taiwan": Golden Lily, Kingfisher Jade & Four Seasons

"The Three Daughters of Taiwan" are what made "The Beautiful Island" famous for tea. These beautiful oolong varieties were developed by tea planters in Taiwan by cross-breeding the best strains of Classic Oolong, particularly Tender Heart and Big Leaf, brought to Taiwan from China. Distinguished by their rich fruity flavor and fresh floral fragrance, each of these three High Mountain Oolongs has its own unique character, and all three trace their roots back to the original venerable lineage of Classic China Oolong.

Jin Xuan Oolong ("Golden Lily" Oolong)

Golden Lily is most renowned for its rich nai-shiang ("milky fragrance"), which gives the tea a distinctive milky taste. It displays a deep golden-green color in the cup, and the smooth buttery flavor which the best grades of Golden Lily release in the mouth has become a hallmark of Taiwan tea lore. Newcomers to High Mountain Oolong often think that this creamy, nutty taste comes from some sort of additive in the tea, but in fact it's the natural character of this charming oolong varietal.

We usually have at least 2 or 3 Golden Lily Oolongs available on our [tea menu here on this website](#).

Tsui Yü Oolong ("Kingfisher Jade" Oolong)

Tsui is an ancient Chinese character that denotes the beautiful blue-green color of "kingfisher feathers," one of China's favorite colors, and yü means "jade." The apple-green color of this tea ranges in tone from emerald to jade. [Kingfisher Jade](#) is best known for its rich floral fragrance, like a bouquet of fresh flowers floating in your cup, sometimes like cassia or peach, sometimes like lilac or lotus, all depending on when it's picked, where it's grown, and what the weather is like the year that it's produced. Tea masters in Taiwan describe Kingfisher Jade as a tea that has "the strong natural aroma of wild flowers" and the taste of "fresh fruit."

[Kingfisher Jade](#) is available for purchase on this website.

Se Ji Chun Oolong ("Four Seasons Spring" Oolong)

The youngest and most exuberant daughter of Classic China Oolong born and bred in Taiwan, Four Seasons Spring is a hearty hybrid that may be picked six or seven times a year, i.e. in all "Four Seasons," and it always has the fresh flowery flavor of "Spring." Connoisseurs in Taiwan describe Four Seasons Spring as "shockingly fragrant" and compare its heady aroma to gardenia blossoms. It has a piquant, complex flavor that unfolds in layers of subtle overtones and lingering aftertastes which vary with each successive infusion of water.

[Certified Organic Four Seasons Oolong](#) is sometimes available on our website, but often sells out due to its popularity and limited supply levels.

These are just general guidelines to highlight your enjoyment and appreciation of Taiwan's High Mountain Oolong teas. The fact of the matter is that the taste of a particular tea lies as much in the person tasting the tea as in the tea itself. Whether the fragrance of a fine Four Seasons Spring smells like lilac or lotus, rose or gardenia, or whether the flavor of a good Golden Lily tastes like nuts or cream, is more in the taste buds of the taster than in the name or description of the tea. As Shakespeare noted, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," and it's equally true that a Kingfisher Jade by any other name would taste as good. Moreover, just as two "Cabernet" wines from two different vineyards produced in two different years taste quite different, despite carrying the same label and general catalog description, so two Golden Lily teas from two different plantations harvested at different times of the year will each have its own different character.

This brings us to a point that cannot be overstated in cultivating the Chinese Art of Tea, and it's very well stated in a quatrain printed on the label of our favorite tea from Cedar Lake plantation:

*The way of tasting tea is found in the form,
in the color, in the fragrance, in the flavor.
The beauty in tasting tea lies in the person,
in their foundation, in their knowledge, and in the setting.*

This means that if you wish to cultivate the Chinese Art of Tea, you must first cultivate your self, cultivate your foundations, cultivate your knowledge, and cultivate the right setting for exploring the nature of your tea. Thereupon, you shall discover its beauty, and thereby become a true cha-ren ("tea person").

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