Rock Tea (Yancha): Wuyi Cliff Oolong and Its Rock Rhyme

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Rock tea (yancha), in summary:** Rock tea (yancha) is the roasted Chinese oolong from the Wuyi Mountains, built on the Da Hong Pao, Shui Xian and Rou Gui cultivars, with a mineral "rock rhyme" (yan yun) as its signature. Buy on the cultivar and the roast level, and brew it gongfu.

Rock tea, yancha, is the family of heavily worked, roasted oolongs from the Wuyi mountains of Fujian, of which Da Hong Pao is the famous member. Its reputation rests on a single evocative idea, the "rock rhyme" or yan yun, and that is exactly where a clear guide is most needed, because yan yun is both a real, describable effect on the palate and a phrase used to justify almost any price. Holding both of those truths at once is the whole skill of buying rock tea well.

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What yancha actually is

Yancha is Wuyi oolong: well oxidised, skilfully roasted (traditionally over charcoal) and grown in the mineral-rich, cliff-strewn Wuyi terrain, a UNESCO heritage site. Heavy processing, real roast and distinctive terroir give a deep, layered cup quite unlike a light Taiwanese oolong, and the better the tea the more clearly that depth resolves into specific fruit, floral and mineral notes rather than just generic "roasty". The tradition centres on a handful of named cultivars, each a different drink.

What "rock rhyme" means

Yan yun is usually described as a deep, cooling, mineral or stony sensation that sits behind the roast and fruit and lingers in a long, almost throat-level finish. That experience is real in good yancha and is not mystical; it is the cumulative impression of terroir, oxidation and roast in a well-made tea. The catch is that the term is unfalsifiable in marketing, since anyone can claim their tea "has yan yun", so treat it as a description of an experience you verify in the cup rather than a guarantee printed on a label. A real rock rhyme shows as depth and a long mineral aftertaste; its mere assertion shows nothing.

The four big-name cultivars

The most famous is Da Hong Pao ("Big Red Robe"), named after the original Six Mother Bushes on Mount Wuyi that legend links to the recovery of a Ming emperor's mother; authentic Da Hong Pao is now blended from cuttings of those bushes and from Shui Xian and Rou Gui leaf, giving a deep, mineral, roasted cup with stone fruit and dark chocolate notes (roughly £30 to £100 per 100g, with real mother tree versions reaching £500 and up). Shui Xian ("Water Sprite") is the workhorse, broad and mineral with a slightly vegetal edge (£20 to £40). Rou Gui ("Cinnamon") brings cinnamon-bark warmth and a brighter floral top note (£25 to £50). Tie Luo Han ("Iron Arhat") is the most pronounced for mineral, dark stone-fruit depth and rock rhyme (£30 to £60). A UK explorer is best served trying a mid-tier Shui Xian or Rou Gui before paying the Da Hong Pao premium, the same buy-on-the-cultivar habit the Da Hong Pao guide develops.

Roast level, the hidden variable

The most practical clarity about yancha is that roast level, not just cultivar, decides much of the flavour, and the same leaf at different roasts becomes almost three different teas. Light roast (qing huo, "green fire") keeps more of the green-floral character; the cup is brighter and closer in spirit to a Taiwanese high-mountain oolong, and a good entry for anyone who finds traditional yancha too dark. Medium roast (zhong huo) is the balanced style most UK importers stock, with integrated mineral depth and stone-fruit still present. Heavy roast (zu huo, "old fire"), built up by repeated re-firing over years, gives coffee-and-cocoa and dark caramel with almost no green character left, an acquired taste but the most celebrated traditional expression. A freshly heavy-roasted yancha can taste of char and needs months to settle; a tea that simply tastes burnt may be over-roasted, too young, or low quality. Always look for the roast level on the pack alongside the cultivar, or you are buying blind.

Brewing it gongfu

Yancha is a gongfu tea by design and gives a flat, disappointing cup brewed Western-style. Use a 100 to 150ml gaiwan or a yixing pot, a generous 5 to 7g of leaf per 100ml, and just-off-boil water at 95 to 100C, which yancha tolerates far better than a delicate Taiwanese oolong. Rinse the leaf for five to ten seconds and discard it, then run a first proper steep of 15 to 20 seconds, lengthening gently from there (20 to 30s, then 30 to 45s and on). Expect eight to twelve distinct cups: the early steeps give the floral and stone-fruit top notes, the middle steeps the mineral rock rhyme, the later ones a sweet mellow finish, the same vessel-and-method discipline the gongfu tea guide sets out.

Rock tea at a glance

Aspect	Note
What it is	Wuyi Mountains oolong; the Chinese cliff-tea tradition
Region	Fujian, Wuyi Mountains UNESCO heritage site
Famous cultivars	Da Hong Pao, Shui Xian, Rou Gui, Tie Luo Han
Yan yun	"Rock rhyme"; the mineral signature of yancha terroir
Roast level	Hidden variable; light, medium, heavy each give a different cup
Brewing	Gongfu; 5 to 7g per 100ml gaiwan; 8 to 12 short steeps
Price tier	£20 to £100+ per 100g; named-bush exceeds £500

Aspect	Note
Buying signal	Named cultivar, named mountain (Wuyi), named roast level, year

On price, the best defence against the legend is simple: famous names and yan yun talk are used at every tier, so judge depth, balance, the absence of acrid burnt notes and the length of finish in the actual cup, and accept that an everyday Shui Xian or Rou Gui is a great drink without a connoisseur price. Rock tea is a real oolong, so the story in the body is just the tea story: caffeine and polyphenols, no miracle; the roast adds flavour, not medicine, so treat any claim about meals or weight as marketing on top of a magnificent tea. The companion oolong tea, Dan Cong oolong and Tieguanyin guides cover the rest of the family, and you can source yancha from the Wuyi range, the brand directory, or the full tea shop.

For the home shelf, see the loose leaf range and worldwide teas.

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teas · One good rock oolong in a small clay pot beats five exotic bags drunk in haste.

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