Oriental Beauty: the oolong made by insects

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Oriental Beauty (Dongfang Meiren in Chinese, also sold as Bai Hao oolong or "champagne oolong") is the tea that depends on being eaten. Tiny tea green leafhoppers feed on the young shoots in summer, the plant responds to the damage, and the leaves develop the honeyed, ripe-fruit aroma this tea is famous for. Taiwan's tea research station describes the leafhopper-affected shoots as part of how the tea is made. Taiwan Tea Research and Extension Station

It is heavily oxidised for an oolong, closer to a black tea in colour, and it needs no roasting to taste sweet.

Why the insects matter

The leafhoppers nibble the leaf edges and stunt the shoots. In response the plant produces defensive compounds, and those compounds carry through manufacture into the finished aroma: honey, ripe peach, sometimes a muscatel note like a second-flush Darjeeling. Research on leafhopper density and tea-plant chemistry has examined exactly this relationship. Leafhopper density and tea plant metabolites

Two consequences follow:

- **No insecticide can be used**, or there are no leafhoppers and no Oriental Beauty.
- **Yields are small and uneven**, which is why good lots are expensive.

What it looks and tastes like

- **Dry leaf:** a mix of colours (white, red, brown, green) with obvious downy white tips.
- **Liquor:** amber to deep orange-red.
- **Aroma:** honey, ripe stone fruit, a hint of spice.
- **Taste:** soft, sweet and round, with almost no astringency and a long honeyed finish.

It is an excellent tea for black-tea drinkers curious about oolong: nothing about it is grassy or green.

How to brew it

In a pot: 3g per 200ml, water at 90 to 95°C, 2 minutes for the first infusion, then longer for later ones.

Gongfu style: 5g per 100ml, 90°C, 20 to 30 seconds, adding time each round.

Do not use fiercely boiling water (the aroma is delicate for such a dark-looking tea) and do not add milk: you would lose everything that makes it special.

Buying it

- **Origin:** the classic areas are Hsinchu and Miaoli in north-west Taiwan.
- **Season:** summer harvest, when the leafhoppers are active. Any other season is not the same tea.
- **Tips:** plenty of white tips is characteristic, though it is not a grade on its own.
- **Price:** real Oriental Beauty is never cheap. Very cheap versions are usually ordinary oxidised oolong.

Its natural home in the wiki is beside Formosa oolong and Taiwanese tea; the brewing basics are in how to brew oolong tea.

Common questions

Are there insects in my tea?

No. The leafhoppers feed on the growing bush; the leaves are processed normally afterwards.

Is the "British queen named it" story true?

It is a well-worn legend rather than documented history. The tea is interesting enough without it.

Is it a black tea?

No, it is classified as an oolong, though it is oxidised enough to look and taste close to one.

Does it need a roast?

No. Its sweetness comes from oxidation and the leafhopper effect, not from charcoal.

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