Rou Gui: the Wuyi oolong that smells of cinnamon

From the teas.co.uk wiki

Rou Gui (??, sometimes written Rougui) means "cinnamon" in Chinese, and that is exactly what the tea smells of: warm bark spice, with dark fruit and a roasted edge behind it. **There is no cinnamon in it.** The aroma comes from the cultivar itself, developed in the Wuyi mountains of northern Fujian, and from the charcoal roasting that finishes the tea.

It is one of the two everyday pillars of Wuyi rock tea, alongside Shui Xian. Where Shui Xian is broad, woody and mellow, Rou Gui is sharper, brighter and more aromatic.

What "rock tea" means

Wuyi oolongs are called yancha, "rock tea", because the bushes grow among the cliffs and gullies of the Wuyi range, where the mineral soil and shade give the tea its distinctive character. Teas grown in the core scenic area command far higher prices than those grown on the outer plains. Our rock tea guide explains the geography and the grading.

The roast matters as much as the place. Rou Gui is usually roasted over charcoal in several rounds, then rested for months before sale. A fresh roast tastes toasty and sharp; a rested one is rounder, and the fruit comes forward.

What to expect in the cup

- **Dry leaf:** dark, twisted, glossy, smelling of toast and spice.
- **Liquor:** deep orange-brown, clear.
- **Aroma:** cinnamon bark, dark cherry or plum, charcoal.
- **Taste:** thick and slightly sweet, with a mineral, drying finish the Chinese call *yan yun*, "rock rhyme".
- **Aftertaste:** long, with a cooling sensation at the back of the throat.

How to brew it

Rou Gui rewards a small pot and lots of leaf.

Gongfu style: 5g per 100ml gaiwan, water at a full boil (95 to 100°C), rinse the leaves briefly, then 15 to 20 seconds for the first infusion, adding 5 to 10 seconds each time. Expect six or more infusions; the third and fourth are usually the best.

Western style: 3g per 200ml, boiling water, 2 minutes, then re-infuse for longer.

Unlike green tea, this is a tea that wants full-temperature water. Under-brewed Rou Gui tastes hollow. See how to brew oolong tea and oolong roast levels.

Buying without overpaying

- **Ask where it grew.** Zheng yan (core rock area), ban yan (half rock) and outer-area teas differ enormously in price.
- **Ask when it was roasted.** A tea roasted a month ago will taste different in six months.
- **Start cheap.** An everyday Rou Gui teaches you the style; the expensive lots make sense later.
- **Check the ingredients** if you are buying a blend, not a straight tea. Some "cinnamon oolong" products really do add spice.

Common questions

Does Rou Gui contain cinnamon?
No. Plain Rou Gui is tea leaves only. The name describes the aroma.

Is it the same as Da Hong Pao?
No, though both are Wuyi rock teas. Da Hong Pao is usually a blend of cultivars; Rou Gui is a single named cultivar.

Is it very strong?
It is full-flavoured rather than harsh, and it has caffeine like any tea. Brewed gongfu style, each small cup is modest.

Can I use a normal teapot?
Yes. Use 3g per 200ml and boiling water, and drain the pot completely each time.

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