Pu-Erh: The Yunnan Fermented Tea Family

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Pu-erh, in summary:** Pu-erh is the Yunnan fermented tea family with two main styles (sheng raw, shou ripe) and several pressed formats; earthy, ages beautifully.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in April 2026.

Pu erh (???) is the post fermented Chinese tea, Yunnan grown leaves that age over years (sheng/raw) or undergo accelerated fermentation (shou/cooked). The only tea that really does get better with age, with vintage examples from the 1990s fetching £1000+ per cake. The cup is earthy, complex, distinctly different from green/black/oolong.

The basics

- **Origin:** Yunnan Province, southern China.
- **Plant:** Camellia sinensis var. assamica (large leaf variety).
- **Process:** Post fermented, microbial activity continues after production.
- **Two types:** Sheng (raw) and shou (cooked / ripe).
- **Format:** Often compressed into cakes, bricks, or tuocha; also loose.
- **Caffeine:** 40-60mg per cup.

Sheng vs Shou pu erh

Sheng (Raw / Green) Pu erh

Traditional pu erh:

1. Pluck (older leaves)
2. Wither
3. Briefly fix (less complete than green tea)
4. Roll
5. Sun dry
6. Compress into cakes
7. Age over years/decades, slow microbial fermentation

Young sheng tastes greener, bitter. Aged sheng (10-30+ years) develops sweet fruity mushroomy complexity comparable to fine aged wine.

Shou (Cooked / Ripe) Pu erh

1970s technique:

1. Sheng pu erh process up to compression.
2. Wet pile fermentation (35-50°C, high humidity, weeks).
3. Dry.
4. Compress.

The wet pile fermentation produces aged style character in months instead of decades. Shou pu erh is more accessible, more affordable, more consistent than sheng.

What pu erh tastes like

Young sheng (1-3 years)

Bitter, astringent, slightly green leaning. Drinkers either love or actively dislike. Ages well into something better.

Mid aged sheng (5-15 years)

Mellowing; complex; layers emerging.

Aged sheng (15+ years)

Sweet, fruity, sometimes mushroomy / earthy. Premium pricing.

Shou pu erh

Earthy, "barnyard," dark, sometimes "cooked earth" character. Less astringent than young sheng. Accessible to new drinkers.

How to brew pu erh

Western brewing

1. 1 tsp leaves per 200ml.
2. Boiling water.
3. Brief rinse infusion (5-10 seconds; pour out).
4. Steep 3-5 minutes for actual cup.

Gongfu brewing (recommended)

1. 5-7g leaves per 100ml.
2. Boiling water.

3. Brief rinse.
4. First infusion: 10-15 seconds.
5. Subsequent infusions: 15-30 seconds increasing.
6. Quality pu erh yields 10-15+ infusions.

The Yunnan origin

Yunnan Province, southern China, borders Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam. The region's:

- Subtropical climate
- Mountainous terrain
- Ancient tea trees (some 1000+ years old)
- Indigenous tea cultivating peoples

.all contribute to pu erh's distinct character. The same plant variety grown elsewhere doesn't produce comparable tea.

Compressed formats

Pu erh is often sold in compressed forms:

- **Bing cha (cake):** Round 357g cakes, the most common.
- **Tuocha (nest):** Bowl shaped, 100-250g.
- **Zhuan cha (brick):** Rectangular, 200-1000g.
- **Loose pu erh:** Available but less common.

The compressed format facilitates aging, the dense format with limited air access creates the right conditions for slow fermentation.

Vintage and pricing

Aged pu erh commands significant premiums:

- Young sheng (1-3 years): £15-50 per 100g
- Mid aged (5-10 years): £30-100 per 100g
- Aged (15-25 years): £100-500 per 100g
- Vintage premium (25+ years from named producers): £500-5000+ per cake

Pu erh is the only tea with a serious aged tea collector market.

Health claims (with measured framing)

Modest evidence for cholesterol reduction; some triglyceride evidence; preliminary blood sugar evidence. Not a miracle for body weight, whatever the marketing says. Detailed evidence framing.

Storage

The only tea where storage actively improves the product:

- Airtight or breathable container (ventilated for sheng aging)
- Cool, stable temperature (15-25°C)
- Moderate humidity (40-70%)
- Away from strong odours
- Years to decades for sheng aging

Cautions

- **Heavy metals.** Some pu erh has had lead/cadmium concerns. Choose reputable producers; certified organic where possible.
- **Caffeine.** Standard caffeinated tea level.
- **Iron absorption.** Tannins; drink between meals.
- **Pregnancy.** Within NHS caffeine limits.

Buying pu erh in the UK

- **Mei Leaf (London).** Strong pu erh selection.
- **Postcard Teas.** Smaller premium.
- **What Cha.** Wide online range.
- **Asian groceries.** Everyday shou pu erh.
- **Direct Chinese tea importers.** For vintage purchases.

FAQ

What is pu erh? Post fermented Chinese tea from Yunnan. The only tea that improves with age.

Sheng vs shou? Sheng = traditionally aged. Shou = accelerated fermentation (1970s technique).

Caffeine? 40-60mg per cup.

Health claims? Modest cholesterol evidence; claims about weight are overhyped.

Best for beginners? Shou pu erh, accessible without long aging.

Curator's note: pu erh is one of the world's great tea categories, and the only one where age really transforms the cup. Worth exploring for serious tea drinkers; the gongfu brewing experience with 30-year old sheng is unforgettable. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Pu-erh overview at a glance

Aspect	The note
Origin	Yunnan province, southwest China
Plant	Camellia sinensis var. assamica (large-leaf)
Sheng (raw)	Natural aging across years to decades

Aspect	The note
Shou (ripe)	Post-fermented in piles for weeks
Pressed formats	Cakes (bing), bricks (zhuan), tuocha (nest)
Loose pu-erh	Also widely sold; same processing
Cup character	Earthy, mineral, dark-fruited; ages beautifully
UK entry price	£10-£25 for 100g of decent shou

More on pu-erh

Continue with pu-erh tea, the pu-erh benefits evidence and sheng vs shou.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

If this piece pointed you somewhere, these are the obvious places to land: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Pop into the tea shop for cakes, bricks and loose pu erh; UK shipping is free from £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Aged or young, pu erh is best priced by the cup. Loose and pressed leaf usually beat bags on that.

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- Black tea
- Oolong tea
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