Sheng vs Shou Pu-Erh: Raw and Cooked

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Sheng and shou pu-erh, in summary:** Sheng (raw) and shou (cooked) are the two pu-erh families; sheng natural-ages over years, shou uses 1973 accelerated wet-pile fermentation.

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

Sheng (raw) vs shou (cooked) is the fundamental pu erh distinction. Sheng is traditionally aged for years/decades, slow microbial fermentation produces gradually deepening character. Shou uses 1970s developed wet pile fermentation to accelerate aging into months. Different cups; different price points; different drinking traditions.

The summary table

Attribute	Sheng (Raw)	Shou (Cooked)
Process	Traditional sun drying + multi year aging	Wet pile fermentation (weeks)
Cup colour	Light to dark amber (depending on age)	Deep brown black
Flavour profile	Bitter young; sweet/fruity/mushroomy aged	Earthy, "barnyard," dark cooked
Aging potential	Decades; improves with age	Limited additional aging
Beginner friendly	No (young sheng is harsh)	Yes (accessible immediately)
Vintage value	High (premium tier)	Lower
Pricing	£15-5000+ per cake	£10-50 per cake

Sheng (Raw / Green) Pu erh

Process

1. Pluck (often older leaves; sometimes ancient tea trees).
2. Wither.
3. Brief fixing (less complete than green tea, leaves enzymes partially intact).
4. Roll.
5. Sun dry.
6. Compress into cakes.

7. Age for years/decades.

Aging journey

- **Young (1-3 years):** Bitter, astringent, slightly green leaning. Bracing if you like it.
- **Mid aged (5-15 years):** Mellowing; layers emerging; complexity developing.
- **Aged (15-30+ years):** Sweet, fruity, mushroomy, earthy. Premium pricing.
- **Vintage (30+ years from named producers):** Superb; a collectors' market.

Why sheng is collectible

Like wine, sheng pu erh does improve with age. Vintage cakes from named producers (Menghai Tea Factory, others) from the 1980s-90s command thousands of pounds per cake. Ageing builds a distinctive flavour that fresh tea can't replicate.

Shou (Cooked / Ripe) Pu erh

Process

1. Sheng pu erh process up to compression.
2. Wet pile fermentation: leaves piled with controlled moisture and temperature (35-50°C, high humidity).
3. Microbial fermentation accelerates aging, weeks instead of years.
4. Dry.
5. Compress.

The 1970s innovation

Shou fermentation technique was developed in 1973 at Kunming Tea Factory, refined at Menghai Tea Factory in 1975. The technique allowed the producing region to meet rising demand for aged style pu erh without 20-year wait times.

Cup character

Earthy, sometimes "barnyard," dark cooked character. Less astringent than young sheng. More approachable for new pu erh drinkers. Doesn't have the layered complexity of vintage sheng but provides accessible aged style character.

How to brew both types

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.

Gongfu brewing (better)

1. 5-7g leaves per 100ml gaiwan.
2. Boiling water.
3. Brief rinse.
4. First infusion: 10-15 seconds.
5. Subsequent infusions increasing.
6. Quality pu erh yields 10-15+ infusions.

Caffeine

40-60mg per 200ml cup. Both sheng and shou are caffeinated.

Health credentials

Modest:

- Cholesterol reduction (some clinical evidence)
- Triglyceride reduction (modest evidence)
- A different polyphenol profile to other teas
- Possible probiotic related effects (microbially fermented)

Don't rely on pu erh to change your weight, whatever the marketing claims. More on pu erh benefits.

Choosing between sheng and shou

Choose sheng if

- You're patient (drinking aged sheng pays off)
- You're a serious tea collector
- You want maximum complexity and aging potential
- You enjoy bitter young teas (or have access to aged premium)

Choose shou if

- You're new to pu erh
- You want immediate aged style character
- Budget conscious
- You prefer earthier, less astringent character

Storage

Both benefit from proper storage:

- Cool, stable temperature (15-25°C)

- Moderate humidity (40-70%)
- Away from strong odours
- Sheng: ventilated container for slow aging
- Shou: airtight to preserve current character

Cautions

- **Heavy metals.** Some pu erh has had lead/cadmium concerns. Choose reputable producers.
- **Caffeine.** Standard caffeinated tea level.
- **Pregnancy.** Within NHS caffeine limits.

Buying in the UK

- **Mei Leaf (London).** Strong pu erh selection across both types.
- **Postcard Teas.** Smaller premium.
- **What Cha.** Wide online range.
- **Asian groceries.** Everyday shou pu erh; sometimes sheng.

FAQ

Sheng or shou for beginners? Shou, accessible character without long aging.

Is sheng better than shou? Different products. Aged sheng has the highest collectible value; shou is the everyday accessible option.

Caffeine difference? Both 40-60mg per cup. Comparable.

Can I age shou like sheng? Limited additional aging benefit, the wet pile fermentation already produced aged style character.

Best vintage? Sheng from 1980s-90s named producers commands premium pricing.

Curator's note: shou is the everyday accessible pu erh; sheng is the collectors' tea. Both have a place in serious tea drinking. Start with shou; explore sheng once you're hooked. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

What you need to know: sheng vs shou pu-erh

Aspect	The note
Sheng	Raw / green pu-erh; natural ageing over years to decades
Shou	Cooked / ripe pu-erh; accelerated wet-pile fermentation since 1973
Young sheng taste	Bright, vegetal, slightly astringent; an acquired character
Aged sheng taste	Deep, mellow, earthy-sweet; after 7-20+ years
Shou taste	Dark, earthy, smooth from day one; coffee-rich profile
Caffeine	Both moderate; 30-50mg per cup typical
Pricing	Young sheng £30-£80; aged sheng £100+; shou £20-£50 per 100g

Aspect	The note
Buying signal	Named region (Yunnan), named producer, named year, named cake/loose

More on pu-erh

- Pu-erh tea
- Pu-erh range
- Yunnan tea region
- Oolong tea

Reference noted

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

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Shop the tea range at teas.co.uk for raw and cooked pu erh; UK delivery is free past £35.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Raw or cooked, pu erh is fairly judged by the cup. Loose and caked leaf usually win, though bags of shou sometimes do.

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

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