

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 21: Chinese Tea with Leo Wong

October 6, 2020

Hey, I'm Julie Rose. Welcome to *Love What You Love*. I'm an author, creator, and enthusiast, and I've always been fascinated by the things that people are super into, because they're always a unique expression of curiosity, and joy, and wonder. So every week I'll introduce you to another fascinating human who's into really interesting stuff.

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Welcome back! Or, Welcome! In the Bay Area, we basically have six seasons; spring, summer, false autumn, summer #2, autumn, and winter. It started cooling off last week after beastly temperatures and smoke, and I got lulled into that lovely autumn mindset. We even bought mini pumpkins, for Pete's sake! But as always, it was that false autumn, and summer #2 is here through the middle of October. We'll get a proper autumn for about four weeks, then the rains come - let's hope - and we'll be into winter.

I bore you with the Bay Area's weather because in China right now it's the end of the Mid-Autumn Festival. This year it started on October 1st and is runs through October 7th. It's also called the Moon Festival or the Mooncake Festival, and it's a time for reunions with family, which often happen over a cup of tea. This week's guest, Leo Wong, is a native of Yunnan, China, the actual birthplace of tea. Like, literally where tea was first cultivated. He was so inspired by the history and the health benefits of tea, he started his own business sourcing loose-leaf tea directly from sustainable, women-led farms.

In this conversation, we talk about sleeping on a farmer's floor, the cultural implications of re-steeping tea, why that tea bag ain't what you think it is, and so much more. So find out why Leo loves Chinese tea, and why you might learn to love it too.

Julie: Hey, Leo! Thank you so much for joining me today.

Leo: Hey Julie. Thank you for having me.

Julie: I am really excited to talk with you because tea is something I'm interested in but I know almost nothing about. I think I've come to the right person!

You started a company called BornTea, and it's all about sourcing tea directly from farmers in China, mostly women-owned farms it looks like, and I'm really curious, where did that come from? Have you always loved tea? What was the genesis of this whole concept?

Leo: So, I've always loved tea. Sometimes I drink more tea than water in a day, very frequently, because I feel like this is something good, something healthy for my body, so I drink a lot. And then I realized when some of my friends were asking me, because they kind of know that my hometown is in Yunnan, which is in the southwest part of mainland China, and it's the origin of black tea and Pu-erh.

So I started to receive repetitive questions, "Where can I buy this? And that?" And I was like, "Maybe there's some opportunities, some market there," so then I started to

explore, and I realized that a lot of times it's not as easy to get access to quality teas directly from the birthplaces of teas, or the origin of tea, especially at an affordable price. So I started to ponder about the idea, started to do some research, and then I thought, "Just give it a try. This is something I love, good for other people, good for the world as well." That's how I got started overall.

Julie: I was reading on your website that you actually went and stayed with the farmers as you were, kind of, building this concept. How was that? And what did you learn while you were staying with them?

Leo: The reason that we wanted to do this was because we really wanted to experience the culture, and how tea was made, the overall processing, and so on. So I decided to go to different birthplaces of tea. Birthplaces meaning that, for example, Pu-erh is from Yunnan, and there's an oolong tea called Tieguanyin in China that's from a province called Fujian. So I went to different provinces to know their process, to know their history. I really wanted to know more about how you pluck the tea leaves, and how the oxidation works, and overall.

They're very welcoming. They're like, "Yeah, you can sleep in that area," and they'd point to it on the floor, so I literally slept on the floor for more than a week. Every morning, I woke up and went to the farmland with them to do the sourcing, to check out the teas with them. It was a very fascinating experience.

Julie: Do we know when tea started being cultivated?

Leo: 2700 BCE, roughly speaking. It was a long, long time ago. [laughs] And then there was a lot of history about tea, and there were some wars that were caused by tea because tea was regarded as one of the treasures in the world, so people were trading gold for teas and so on. There were a lot of histories like this.

Julie: Wow!

Leo: Yeah, there's a lot of things in a cup of tea!

Julie: No kidding! So, was tea cultivation... did it originate in China, or did it kind of independently originate in different parts of the world?

Leo: That's a very interesting question, because when you ask this question to people from different countries, you may receive different answers. But you know, from my point of view, and I try to be as objective as possible, yes, it's from my hometown actually, Yunnan. There are a few reasons. The higher altitude, for example, where I am right now, Kunming, which is kind of like the city, it's about 1,900 meters above sea level. So, the combination of higher altitude, and the right amount of rainfall, and so on, that's what a good tea area is like; weather and geographical characteristics that makes, for example, the leaf relatively larger than most regions, and so on.

So, they form some of the features of tea, and especially back then a lot of trades were happening between here and, for example, India. So a lot of things were caused by tea, and you see the trade, so it also helped the economy scale. Specifically the place is called Xishuangbanna, which is like 600km roughly from here.

Julie: Is cultivating tea... either back then or now, is it relatively difficult, or is it a fairly easy crop to grow?

Leo: I think in terms of growing it, it's not the most difficult part. I would say, given the right characteristics of the region, it's not as difficult. Another key point is the processing. By

processing, a lot of times, like the oxidation... and different amounts of oxidation causes the tea leaves to become different teas; black tea, yellow tea, white tea. So actually, fun fact, all the teas come from the same tea tree. It's just the processing that makes it different. Like black tea has more oxidation, and for white tea, green tea, it has less oxidation, which means it preserves more antioxidants, and so on.

Julie: When you say oxidation, what do you mean by that?

Leo: That means exposed to air, in a nutshell. If we let it be in the air, then it gradually will turn, for example, different colors because of the substance present in the tea leaves. For example, the amount of caffeine and polyphenols it will make it taste bitter. That's where the bitterness comes from, caffeine and polyphenols, and so on. So the longer/higher the oxidation, then the caffeine is actually more. So for the same amount of black tea, it has more caffeine than green tea. So there are different properties that will form as a result of different processing.

Going back to your point about some of the key things for making the teas. One of the things is definitely how it gets oxidizes, and there are also some processes like rolling. It's called rolling the tea leaves. It forms different shapes and, kind of, stops some of the chemical processes as well. These are some of the tea-making processing that I found very fascinating when I was in the tea land and the tea factory nearby. I learned so much.

Julie: So, like with a wine, where the grapes are grown affects the taste of the wine. Is that true also with tea?

Leo: Overall, yes. Some specific points to that. There are different... I'll use Chinese tea as an example because this is the type of tea that I'm most familiar with, but I'm sure there are a lot of other regions that might have similar observations. For example, in the northern or eastern part of China, they actually have different teas, like the tea leaves are more flat and sometimes thinner. And in the south and southwest it's, like, bigger, relatively regular-shaped. So not only the tea itself is different, the tea type is also different because of where it's from.

In Zhejiang province, there's a place called Hangzhou, which is famous because it's, like, Alibaba's headquarters. In that location, a lot of the teas that people drink there are called Dragon Well, Longjing tea. It's a type of green tea. This is one of the examples that in different regions, sometimes they cannot make the same type of teas as, for example, in the south where I am. Despite the fact they're from the same tree, it doesn't mean they have the same shape and so on. It's just from the same tree. Plus the fact that there are also different processes that cause them to become different.

Julie: Got it. That makes sense.

Leo: Fascinating, isn't it?

Julie: Yes! So, what are, kind of, the characteristics of Chinese tea versus something you'd get from, like, India?

Leo: There are a few things. First, the leaves are larger. That's basically because of the geographical reasons that causes the leaf to be bigger, because the leaf's wanting to get more oxygen. At higher altitude it has less oxygen content in the air, so it needs to be bigger to absorb more air, so it has larger leaves. A lot of, like, secondary effects come from it. For example, it can brew... we call it re-steep. It is one of the ways that people here, how they compare how good a tea is, is the number of steeps. How many

times that you can add hot water again, and again, and again until the flavor gradually fades out.

Julie: Fascinating! And so...

Leo: That also forms... Sorry to interrupt you, but I have to. [laughs] I didn't know I was that rude.

Julie: No, go ahead! [laughs]

Leo: Sometimes people, kind of, form the family gathering time because you can re-steep it multiple times with people talking, and spend more time. That forms some of the really important tea cultures in China.

Julie: I was going to ask you about tea culture. Because tea has been cultivated for so long, what are the cultural implications of tea in China?

Leo: Yeah, so there are a number. Some of the important ones, I would say, like, every family has tea in their home. They use it as a way to spend time with the elderly, spend time with parents, very often this is the... apart from having meals and so on, this is one of the important ways that... the communication time that happens. This is definitely one of them.

Secondly, a lot of businesses also build on top of the tea-drinking culture, because when a person from Company A invites a person from Company B, and then they kind of talk the business over a cup of really good tea. Like, "Oh, this is 80 Pu-erh..." and people initiate a rapport and start to have more conversation. Because this is a sort of bonding, and people know that if you serve really good teas for other people, that means respect, that you want to build really true friendship. This is some of the tea culture that's very deep rooted in this country.

Julie: A question... and I'm sure this is going to be offensive. Loose tea or teabags?

Leo: [laughs] Well, I have to explain. Of course it's going to be loose-leaf teas. But let me explain. Before I got into this business, I already knew that teabags, because of the mass production and so on, are not as good. But the thing is, I did not realize how bad they actually are. I don't want to generalize that overall the teabag is bad because that's not a fair way to say that. You can still put good quality loose leaf teas into a tea bag, it's just not as optimal, but it's still possible. So let's put these super high-quality loose-leaf tea bags aside.

A lot of the teabags are created by big companies. When I visited the tea lands and some of the tea production areas, the teas inside teabags are actually tea dust. So, tea dust... it's a beautiful way to say it, but the fact is, basically, the things that after filtering the loose-leaf tea, what remains, it's the things in the tea bag, so it's like rescue, basically.

Julie: So it's like whatever's leftover from the good stuff is put into the tea bags.

Leo: Yeah. Plus some real dust, as a bonus.

Julie: [laughs]

Leo: I was really shocked because I didn't know if someone was spreading the word out. On one hand, it's not as easy to go to tea lands because of the logistics, and a lot of the tea farms and factories are not open to public, so this is something that some people know, but very few people. It's just not a very good thing. I have quite a strong opinion about

the low-quality tea bag, because the fundamental thing about tea is it's good for the body, it's a healthy thing to consume, but if people consume very low quality teabags, tea dust, and so on, then it's kind of the opposite of what it should achieve. So this is something I feel quite strongly about and quite sad, because it is convenient, but the tradeoff is not worth it, I think, especially after going to the tea lands and really seeing how teas are being produced.

Often, because... Okay, I'm exposing a lot of secrets here. [laughs] I hope you like it.

Julie: [laughs] Okay. Good!

Leo: Another secret is that a lot of companies... because they want to make the teabag look premium, they use a material called nylon. At high temperatures, nylon's not good. Plus there are some other plastics in the tea bag, and at high temperatures, it's common sense that it's not a good thing for the body for sure. Stick with loose-leaf teas. It's almost always better. It doesn't have to be very pricey loose-leaf tea.

From my point of view as well, I think a lot of times the very, very high-priced teas are also not worth it because it's very hard to distinguish. Even though some people can, and I can most of the time, but a lot of the time I think the key is to have good value-for-money teas. This also forms some of the basis of why I started BornTea, value for money, affordable, directly from that place, and so on.

Julie: How do you make a perfect cup of tea?

Leo: First, start with BornTea.

Julie: [laughs]

Leo: Just kidding. First, start with some good loose-leaf teas. Again, you don't have to buy very expensive ones. Regular, good, loose-leaf teas are fine. Step two, it depends on where you're from, so for the example I'm giving, it's mostly about what are some good ways to consume Chinese tea. So it can get very complicated, but to simplify it, a good tea is the right amount of tea leaves. Usually, four to seven grams of tea leaves per roughly 250ml of right-temperature water.

For the right temperature, the rule of thumb is, for darker tea leaves, which means higher oxidation, darker tea leaves, use a higher temperature, like boiling point water for black teas and Pu-erh tea. But for some less oxidized teas, like green tea, white tea, you can view them as more delicate so you use a lower temperature, like 75°C, 85°C, and so on.

Lastly is the steeping time. For some of the very traditional ones, like in traditional Chinese tea culture, in the first few steps it's roughly 10-20 seconds, in that range. So that's quite fast, isn't it? Like 10 or 20 seconds. And then you lengthen the time to 45 seconds, like 60... The longer you consume the tea, the longer you have to wait.

One of the things that I realized when I was first doing this, is that some people from other countries, they really want to try Chinese tea, but the way that people consume it actually makes a huge difference. Some of our customers, previously were like, "I put it in my teapot, and I steeped it for 15 minutes, and then I drank it. Why is this so bitter?? Is all Chinese tea so bitter?" It's like, "15 minutes? It's going to be like Chinese medicine."

Julie: Now, what is your opinion on putting sugar and/or cream in tea?

Leo: My point of view is always that there is no one objectively good way to consume, not only tea, but any beverage. What I can say is there's some generally traditional practices that pass from a long history that form the basis of why people think this is the way to make tea. But it depends on a lot of... If someone is from, say, Brazil, or other cultures, then they have their own way of consuming the tea. My point is, it's fine if you put whatever that you want to put in tea. However, I think it's worth trying to enjoy it in the way that has traditionally passed to this day and to see if you like it or not after trying for a period of time. If it's still not, then it's okay to go back to what you think is tasty, because after all, like most beverages, the best beverages are the beverages that you enjoy.

Julie: What is the biggest misconception, or what's the thing that people get wrong about tea?

Leo: That more expensive teas are always better. It can be true to a certain extent, however, a lot of times, when you see super expensive teas, or quite expensive teas, they are expensive maybe for other reasons. For example, one of the teas is called Pu-erh, right, and they use it as an investment of some sort. Roughly 13 years ago people were selling their houses to buy teas to stock somewhere because there were rumors that it would increase in value superfast. So they were selling all their assets to buy teas.

Julie: What is your favorite memory that involves tea from when you were growing up?

Leo: Definitely the time that I drank tea with my parents. It sounds quite... It's almost like a cliché, very normal, but it actually triggered a lot of good memories when I was kid, because I was born and raised in Hong Kong but my hometown is in Yunnan, China. So, because this place is famous for teas, a lot of the time that I spent with my parents was with a cup of good teas and we talk over different things. These kinds of memories are what I treasure the most.

Julie: Did your family have, like, your own family tea culture?

Leo: Not really. We're not, like, super traditional in the way that we consume the tea. A lot of people, they do it in a super traditional style with a lot of years, but our core is the value in the tea. One part of the tea itself and how it's served. The second part is, like, it brings people together.

Julie: This is probably going to be asking who your favorite child is, but what is your favorite kind of tea?

Leo: Longjing. Dragon Well green tea is my favorite kid.

Julie: Why?

Leo: I think mostly it's because of the perception of the taste. It has, like, a very grassy and nature kind of taste that I cannot find in most other teas. This is, like, my default tea, so my favorite.

Julie: And is that a variety that's from your home province?

Leo: Actually, no.

Julie: Ah! [laughs]

Leo: Interestingly, no. It's actually from the place that I mentioned, Hangzhou, Zhejiang. So, that place is famous for Longjing, the Dragon Well green tea, and there are only a few months that people can actually pluck the tea leaves, only around springtime, around

March, can you get it and process the tea leaves, and that serves for the whole year. That also explains sometimes the reason for the higher price for this tea. But it is... Yeah, mmm. [laughs]

Julie: Okay, I won't tell anybody. [laughs] So what is...

Leo: Sorry to interrupt again. My turn to ask you. What is your favorite tea?

Julie: Oh my goodness. I...

Leo: Yeah, what's your, like, default, if any?

Julie: My default is usually English Breakfast with some cream in it.

Leo: Yeah. Okay. You're very honest. [laughs]

Julie: In the process of learning more about tea, and setting aside the teabag situation, what has been the most surprising thing for you?

Leo: There are some characteristics in different regions in terms of how they make the tea and serve the tea. This is one of the vertical differences in China, how differently we serve basically the same thing, tea, and the history behind it. The more that I look at the teas from different countries, for example Turkish tea, or teas from India and so on, every region, they have their specific way of brewing it. Very often, if you don't use that way then it becomes not the best way to consume it. A lot of this is because of the history.

Julie: The tea brewing method, kind of, evolved to optimize the kind of tea in that region.

Leo: Yes, respective to the type of tea that that region has.

Julie: So, is tea grown on every continent?

Leo: No.

Julie: Where is it mostly grown?

Leo: China and India are the two key tea-producing countries. There were some stories, because it's hard to prove right or wrong, that because of wars, because of teas or teas as trade, after the origination from China, people from... there were some Dutch, some English, they brought teas to India and started trading. So actually a lot of the teas spread through trade, the seed and so on, and then gradually started from a few different tea-producing areas like China and India.

Julie: And how would you characterize the taste difference between a tea grown in China and a tea grown in India?

Leo: It is a little bit hard to generalize because for Chinese tea there are a lot of different varieties, and for India there's different varieties of tea. But I would say it's mostly the look of the tea leaf, the structure, the size that can be generalized in a way. For example, bigger tea leaves, smaller tea leaves, and longer and shorter. Still from the same tree, just because they were grown in different locations they are different.

Julie: Let's say one of my listeners has gotten very inspired by this conversation and wants to get into trying out Chinese tea but they're feeling intimidated, what is your advice to them? How would they start?

Leo: Call me! My number is... Just kidding. A lot of information on the internet for sure, but obviously the best is to buy a little bit from different tea shops so you get a taste of it,

and then look it up online how to brew, or the way that I suggested is one of the ways to try Chinese tea, and then to try for a period of time.

A lot of the time, if it's the first time that people try, there will be a few... I would say, not getting into the habit of how to make the teas, that causes some taste difference. But after doing it for a little bit more time, say a month, usually you can get into the habit of easily trying multiple teas with the correct brewing method and so on. So I would say, buy a little bit of tea leaves, give it a try for a period of time to see which kind of tea you like.

And it may not be necessary to go into the history that soon because it's... for me as well, I try to learn as much as I can and especially look at the history because I find it super interesting, wars and so on, but that would be information overload. So just drink, if you like it, continue to drink. If you don't like it, that's totally okay too.

If they try Chinese tea and they don't like it, maybe they will like teas from India, from Turkey, and from some other tea-producing areas as well.

Julie: Do you recommend brewing in a teapot, or doing pour over into a cup?

Leo: Firstly, based on the principle of traditional Chinese tea, the best is to put it in a small teacup. Technically it's not like a pot in the sense that it's not as big, because there are also different variations of teapots. Let's say a teapot is a bigger one, so if we stick with a smaller one for the traditional Chinese way, then you brew it... If you put it in a smaller cup and steep it with the tea leaves in there, then it will get bitter pretty fast. That's almost the main downside.

This is one of the reasons people don't like Chinese tea from our research and what we notice from our friends, that the brewing time is a little bit long and causing it to be quite bitter. So if we can minimize that, then no matter if you use a teapot... because there are some teapots with a strainer, like a filter, and that's good too so the water is not directly in contact with the tea leaves.

Julie: Got it. Okay. Well Leo, thank you so much for taking so much time to share your passion and to educate me and the listeners. This has been a real joy. Thank you.

Leo: Awesome. It's super enjoyable to have this tea chat with you.

Julie: Yes! I've been drinking water. I should've been drinking tea.

Leo: Now you can try the traditional way of making it. Remember not to directly contact the water for so long and see how you like it.

Julie: Exactly. I will definitely be changing that up. Thank you again, Leo. I very much appreciate it.

Leo: Thank you for the time, too.

You can find Leo on Instagram [@HKLeoWong](#). I'll put a link to Leo's socials in the show notes.

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Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who has rated, reviewed, and socialized already. A special shoutout to Ronda Grizzle for her tweet this week. It was amazing.

Zeke Rodrigues Thomas at Mindjam Media provided amazing editing assistance. You can find Zeke at MindjamMedia.com. Also, just a reminder that all of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website, so if you have a deaf or hard-of-hearing friend who would like to meet our amazing guests, send them over to LoveWhatYouLovePod.com. The music for *Love What You Love* is called "[Inspiring Hope](#)" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

Okay y'all, go out there and love the hell out of whatever it is that you love. You need it, and we need it for sure. Thanks for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

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