

Tasting notes by Alexander Eichener aeichener@hotmail.com

Malawi Teas from Satemwa Estate (10 gram samples each)

Bvumbwe Needles

Dry Leaf:

Extremely fragrant, powerful, with a stunning nose: hearty, green, slightly animalic. Only the very best Darjeelings and Nepals can match this impact.

Very appealing black-and white colour (actually, dark green contrasting with silver hair, two-striped like fir needles: a "zebra" tea). The buds are comparatively thin and short, smaller than many other African assamica cultivars, and are bent and curved rather than straight as Chinese Yin Zhen needles

Infusion:

90° C for 8 mins. Two spoons per mug. Very intense hayish steeping flavour, mostly herbally-green. Light spearmint flavours come up after 3 mins; bit of camphor. The wet leaves - with a beautiful mellow smell - show clear red demarcations of partial oxidation, exactly like our Kenyan Yin Zhen; some leaves remained light green, other were thoroughly red. In contrast to classic orthodox black tea manufacturing practice, where even oxidation colours from one leaf to the other are aspired to, this variety actually is the hallmark of quality (and flavour richness) of this handmade "white" or rather yellow tea.

Second infusion for 5 mins: during steeping it appears less minty; autumnal leaf notes, spicy.

Liquor:

Many a Chinese taster would describe this as a "yellow tea" rather than a white (see oxidation noted above), but the classic denominations and distinctions anyhow do not match the characteristics of the New African Teas. Colour after 8 mins is a middle amber with orange and green reflexes, clean and clear cup.

Smell shows a few agrumen notes (notably kumquat). Taste presents a rather rich, developed body of impressive roundness. This tea, unlike the Kenyan whites, did not change so much during drinking, though it indeed developed in the glass. Only very faint acidity (compared to new African greens), but enough to enliven it.

Body notes show spearmint, ripe yellow hay, slightly subdued fruit esters. The finish is very elegant, almost deceptively so, because the acidity and the hardly noticeable tannine do not show off. Still, a remarkable aftertaste. Without a doubt, one of the best silver needles I have ever been graced to taste, better than the high-end Chinese Yin Zhens that are available on the German specialty market.

Second infusion, same amount of water, 5 mins:

African whites do not only allow, but almost necessitate a second infusion; such gong-fu style tasting allows for richer diversity of fragrances and aromata. And it makes the teas cheaper by 50 % , too, if think about it from this angle :-). Kumquat now clearer, another taster noted fresh abricot in bouquet and taste. Slightly slimmer in body, but still with a long elegant finish.

Meditative and yet refreshing. For tea, this is very much what a Schloss Johannisberger is for white wine.

Thyolo Oolong

Dry leaf:

Very fragrant (freshly cut grass with sweet flower notes). Nicely hand-rolled long leaf, very twisted and wound, thus bulky in packaging. Appealing presentation of changing colours (from

dark emerald to middle green, with some yellow spots mixed in, according to partial oxidation and tip content).

Infusion:

At first, 4 mins with about 90° C water. A plastic mesh filter was used. During initial stewing, vegetable (yes, not vegetable: vegetable) notes were perceptible. Light green and middle green infused leaf, very little oxidation. Beautiful floral notes of wet leaf, a bit like fresh linden blossom (easily confused with lemon), and daffodil in background.

Second infusion 5 mins with same temperature. Rounder, more mature stewing notes, a bit fruitier. Meadowy overall smell, maybe a hint apricot.

Liquor:

A lightly opaque cup, green-yellow with orange reflexes. Agrumen notes in bouquet, and a bit honey. Very slim body (too slim for a classical oolong), long finish with the lightest of (elegant) astringency. Expands a bit in the glass, with time. A tea of significant potential, with excellent leaf material, carefully plucked and rolled. If it were to approach an East Asian oolong, the processing of the leaves might be improved (steps to check might be harder rolling, and a bit longer oxidation time). Also, the oxidized leaf seems to have been only very lightly fired and not really baked; a step which apparently in traditional Chinese oolong craftsmanship is quite important (and a bit mumbo-jumboed).

Second infusion with same amount of leaf per water comes out too weak, but has very pleasant agrumen notes in bouquet. Shorter in finish, body remains slim.

In its present incarnation, if one were to describe it by conventional semantics (which however often are defied by the "new" African teas, as Nigel Melican has repeatedly pointed out), this would be addressed as a pleasant white tea of definite upper class (I'd rank it an upper "good" or a low "very good"), with more afterglow than expected by whites.

Zomba Pearls

Dry leaf:

A bit overwhelming and "edgy" smell (of salt cracker sticks). The "pearls" are not what you might know as round Chinese jasmine pearls, but are loosely handrolled oblong little rolls (sometimes approximating tear drop shape) of appealingly mixed middle green and dark green colour.

Infusion:

4 mins of 90° water. Complex stewing smells, a bit asparagus. Wet leaf at end appears a bit fresher and fruitier. Very little visible leaf oxidation.

Second infusion after 2 hours intermediary air contact in the filter: 5 mins of 90° water. The wet curled leaves had undergone a light secondary oxidation, as altered colour showed.

Liquor:

Much clearer cup, light green. Taste is far more herbal, almost like a tisane. More reminding of a "classical" white tea. Elegant, pre-Raffaellite, and a wee bit boring ;-). First impression: good first half, then breaks off. Let's see how it develops in the glass.

Second infusion: became a bit more tea-ish, develops a tiny behind with a wee bit astringency. But needs probably longer stewing time than just 5 mins.

Overall, an elegant and refined white tea in unusual form. The sharp smell of the dry leaf however may be a put-off for some. Diverging from Nigel's description on the "Nothing but Tea"

website (not about this specific tea, but about other pearls), I could not detect any fruity flavours or smells. In my opinion, the oblong rolled form is cute and makes for a very nice unfolding and dancing in the tasting glass. Teas like these are excellently suited for some Gong Fu style experimenting and playing around, with varying temperatures and stewing times.

Pu-erh

Dry leaf:

Looks like an LTP or a very fine broken, just a notch above dust. A very interesting and surprising change from the previous integral leaf teas. Intense vegetable smells of hay and freshly stripped tree bark (green cambium).

Infusion:

Appr. 5-6 minutes (I lost time) at 95° C. Strong caramel notes during stewing, mixed with vanilla custard. Possibly some wood notes, no coffee roast tones though. No animal notes either. Later, light fruit notes (bramble-berries) develop shyly.

Liquor:

Extremely clear, lucid cup in spite of rapid colouring (a middle coffee red-brown with golden reflexes). Bouquet with a faint clam allusion, the fermentation note only very subdued together with some floweriness (in a Pu-erh !). Taste is much lighter (thank God) and more elegant than the colour had suggested. A complex tea, extremely harmonic and well-built. Light but long aftertaste of a faint woody fermentation note. On further sips, the tea then continues to change and develop in the cup, all of a sudden presenting prevalent cedar notes.

The tea allows for a second stewing indeed (amber colour), but that one was quite bland and mild.

I don't know whether it's serendipity or geniality (probably both, as usual) that made this experiment succeed, but this tea is absolutely outstanding. I don't know how Pu-erh connoisseurs - to which august and closed clique yours humbly does not belong - would judge it in proper comparison, but I remain impressed.