THAILAND

Tea tasting at Mae Salong Central Hills. Center: The Chinese Martyrs Memorial Museum, in Mae Salong, is dedicated to Kuomintang soldiers. Far left: The valley's lush slopes once grew opium. Inset: A member of the Akha tribe.

Tea Time

In the far northern reaches of Thailand is an intriguing taste of Chinese history, one best enjoyed over a locally grown cuppa.
By KAREN J. COATES *Photographed by* JERRY REDFERN

I WAKE TO A BUTTER-COLORED SUN CAST ACROSS A green valley. Neat, parallel rows of tea bushes ribbon their way across the terrain. The sky spreads wide and clear with a single cotton-candy cloud, the air sweet with frangipani. I drink in the moment before my head begins to swirl, and my mood turns slightly mean. It's early, and I need caffeine.

Ask, and I shall receive. A young man shuffles across the tiles, quietly serving a pot of oolong so crisp and clean with light floral hints, it's like drinking the morning light. My head clears and I start to feel alive. Better than that, actually. This tea is exceptional. It's said this local brew, in the northern hills of Thailand, outshines its ancestral mother in Taiwan.

Doi Mae Salong is a mountain made for tea—and for soldiers with a colorful past, one tinged with its own addictions. In the 1950's, anticommunist Kuomintang forces settled in these serpentine hills of the Golden Triangle. They'd been driven out of their homeland in Yunnan by Mao Zedong's communist army. They spread first into Burma's jungles, gaining reputations as fierce fighters and the region's heavyweight traders in opium (which helped fund their fight). When their presence in Burma became untenable, many Chiang Kai-shek loyalists were shepherded to Taiwan, headquarters of the KMT. But a band of soldiers known as the "Lost Army" remained in the region, settling across the border in Thailand. Eventually Thailand's king granted refuge to the soldiers and their families in exchange for defense against the kingdom's own communist enemies. Those battles lasted through the early 1980's.

When they ended, the Thai government strongly encouraged the soldiers to kick the opium trade and grow alternative crops. Tea proved a logical contender; the high-value substitute crop provided a viable income as well as a direct link to Taiwan. Today, Mae Salong, also known as Santikhiri, remains an enclave of Yunnan: red lanterns dangle from doorways, restaurants specialize in Yunnan ham and the children here learn three languages in school—Thai, English and Chinese. "I am Yunnanese," a vendor in the local morning market announces proudly, before serving a spicy bowl of noodle stew with cabbage, pork and chili. She offers two little cups of strong, amber-colored tea, for free.

Tea is the reason most travelers visit Mae Salong. It's the spark of life for most residents, too. On weekends, locals gather around wooden counters at teashops scattered across town. People sip, gossip and linger. There is a protocol to serving and tasting tea. It varies slightly from server to server, but more or less everyone abides by certain rules. The dried leaves are always handled with wooden, bamboo or ceramic scoops (metal can taint the taste). Water is boiled to 100 degrees Celsius, utensils are doused, leaves rinsed and rinsed again. The tea is never left long to steep in the pot.

The owner of Ming Yong Tea Factory sets a pot of water on a tabletop tray with built-in burner. She scoops a spoonful of oolong into a clay serving pot. When the water boils, she rinses a set of tasting cups, then fills the pot and immediately dumps the water. The first pour is never to drink, only to "clean glass, clean tea," she explains. Perfectly mirroring the town's mingled cultures, my server goes by alternate names: Phantipa in Thai and Lin in Chinese. She pours a second round of water over the leaves, then immediately transfers the tea to a small, elongated cup for tasting—but not yet. A second, round cup is placed upside-down over the vessel containing the tea. I allow it to sit a moment before flipping the ensemble. As all the locals instruct, I roll the elongated cup in my hands and lift it to my nose to absorb its fragrance. Then I place the hot cup on my eye, as residents tell me it awakens one's vision.

Finally, I sip the tea. I taste an oolong infused with local herbs that smell of rice. Another oolong, #12, offers a floral bouquet and a hint of bitterness at the back of the tongue. Oolong #17, by contrast, tastes and smells flowery throughout. Though other varieties are grown, Mae Salong is known for its oolong, which, in terms of fermentation, falls between black (fully oxidized) and green (not oxidized at all). Dozens of shops sell oodles of oolongs, each imparting »

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Hanging lanterns at the Mae Salong Villa Restaurant. Center: Oolong varieties at a small family-run tea factory. Far right: Tending tea fields in Mae Salong. Below right: Tea leaves, densely packed, at Yee Hong Factory.

distinct characteristics that reflect the land, the water, the way the tea is grown, picked and dried. "My factory makes 19 different teas," Lin says, each with its own fragrance, shape and body.

THE LARGE FACTORY ROOM BUZZES WITH WORKERS. Women sort through small mountains of tea, removing stems from each pile of dried leaves spread across tarps on the floor. Another area houses freshly picked green leaves, supple to the touch. The entire room smells of a hot tea bag on a summer day, as if I've jumped right inside the pitcher. Dryers growl and rumble as men load leaves onto a giant conveyor belt that switchbacks through the machines, coming out the bottom in streams of warm, crisp, dry leaves.

Across the street, at the Yeng Hong Factory, workers form giant cannonballs of leaves that are wrapped in cloth and rotated beneath a machine that spins the balls and presses them hard. This continues for several minutes until an employee unravels the balls and dumps the tea into another spinning machine, which ultimately drops the leaves onto the ground for another worker to sort and sift.

Some of Mae Salong's factories and plantations are nondescript, family-run affairs while others, such as the 101 Tea Plantation, loom above the landscape from dominant hilltop perches. The 101 visitor's center is equipped for tour buses with ample room to taste and shop. Its walls are decked in signs describing the necessary steps to processing tea. First, the youngest growth is plucked from the plants. The leaves are "withered" in sunlight for 10 minutes, then stacked in bamboo trays for winnowing. They're sorted, fermented, fired, rolled, spread, covered in white cloth, bound, kneaded and dried.

Out in the sloping fields, 19 workers weave their way through the rows, picking weeds and digging little holes for fertilizer pellets. It's a multicultural field bearing the unique tribal dress of villagers who live throughout this hilly region.

"Mingalaba," a worker with a goatee, greets me in Burmese. "We're all from Burma." Their homeland lies just a few kilometers to the west—they came to Thailand's upland fields and farms seeking better opportunities.

In between plucking weeds, a woman picks a clump of pennywort growing among the tea plants. "You can eat," she says. "Delicious!" Women stuff their sacks with edible herbs they take home for dinner. I touch the soft, pliant tips of new growth on an old plant. This is my first up-close encounter with the region's tea, but it's not my first trip to Mae Salong.

MY INTRODUCTION TO THESE STRIKING HILLS CAME about 18 months earlier, when I arrived with a small group of Asian journalists seeking to interview General Lue Ye-tein. It was cold that day, in the early November rain, and General Lue wore a heavy jacket with a furry collar. He greeted us in his parlor, serving magnificent little cups of peach-fragrant tea. In his early nineties, the general sported a silvery patch of hair and wiry eyebrows. He spoke with utter clarity, recalling his fellow soldiers' days in Yunnan, then Burma, then Thailand. "Before I was a soldier, I was just staying in the countryside in Yunnan," he told me. "The Japanese invaded China so I had to become a soldier to protect China." He ran away from home to train in Nanjing. "I didn't want my parents to know," he said. "I had no money in my pocket." He walked for days. "At that time my shoes were woven from grass. I could walk many kilometers."

That was the existence Lue knew for decades. "My whole life was always walking and climbing mountains and carrying guns. Every day was exercise." War was life; it defined him in most every way. He has never wanted to return to the land that took his father, mother and brother. "They were just all killed and thrown away."

His life, now, is firmly planted in the hills that grow this tea we drink from steaming little glasses. War is long gone; so is the opium trade—a subject he does not wish to discuss. The general has moved on, happy to have found peace and a new prosperity for his people. "I'm not a soldier anymore," he says. "That's all history." ✚

GUIDE TO **MAE SALONG**

GETTING THERE

From Chiang Rai, travel north to Mae Chan, then follow Highway 1089 toward Tha Ton. Watch the signs for Mae Salong and when you reach a police station checkpoint, turn right on Highway 1234 for 21 kilometers over some of the country's steepest, curviest stretches of pavement.

WHERE TO STAY & EAT

Maesalong Mountain Home
Private accommodation overlooking a quiet valley of tea plantations. *9 Moo 12, Maesalongnok, Mae Fah Luang, Chiang Rai; 66-84/611-9508; maesalong-mountainhome.com; bungalows from Bt600.*

Mae Salong Villa Restaurant
Serves an extensive Yunnanese menu (try the roast pork) as well as local Akha black chicken. *5 Moo 1, Maesalongnok, Mae Fah Luang, Chiang Rai; 66-53/765-114; maesalong-villa.com; dinner for two Bt950.*

Mae Salong Central Hills
The hotel restaurant offers Yunnanese ham, sausage, pork and cheese as well as tea-leaf salad. Next door is a tea-tasting room. *66-53/765-113; maesalongcentralhills.net; dinner for two Bt450.*

Salima Restaurant Serves excellent Muslim noodles. *66-53/765-088; a few hundred meters from the Shin Sane Guesthouse, on the north side of Highway 1234 as you come into town; dinner for two Bt320.*