

# HOLIDAY TRAVEL

**Editor's Note:** Qingming Festival is an important time in the lunar calendar for farmers to plan their agricultural activities. It has particular significance on tea culture, partially deciding the quality, and henceforth price, of the tea leaves. China Daily picks four famous types of tea that are produced at four equally renowned mountainous areas across the country at which you can sip the beverage, enjoy the landscape and embrace the season of spring.

## Tea tourists infuse new life into rural China

Traditional cultivation, harvesting and sampling of the restorative leaves — as well as their plantations' bucolic locales — is proving to be a draw for the country's city dwellers

### Scent from Suzhou for 1,000 years

By **CANG WEI** in Nanjing  
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As one of China's top ten famous tea varieties, *biluochun* is renowned for its five outstanding characteristics: Its unique shape, fruity fragrance, floral aroma, white feathery appearance and early picking season.

The name of the tea, *biluochun*, literally means "green snail spring" as it belongs to the category of green

tea, with tightly rolled leaves that resemble the look of snail meat, and is harvested in early spring.

*Biluochun* has a history of more than 1,000 years and was originally produced in the Dongting mountain area near Taihu Lake, Jiangsu province, China's third largest freshwater lake with majestic scenery and abundant agricultural produce.

Originally called *Xiasharenxiang*, which literally means "scarily fra-

grant", the tea is said to have been discovered by a nun from the Dongting mountain in spring. As she randomly plucked a few of leaves of the plant and brewed them in spring water, she was surprised by its wonderful scent, blurring out the words "scary fragrance", which then became used by the local people.

The name stuck until the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). During his visit to Taihu Lake, he was so impressed by the

aroma of the tea that he decided to give it a more elegant name to match its lingering note on the palate.

Since then, it has become one of the most coveted green tea varieties, favored by the rich and powerful.

The major tea plantation is in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, where the climate and soil are considered the best for the cultivation of the variety. The core production area in the city is around 2,000 hectares.

Ji Xiaoming, secretary of Suzhou's Dongtingshan Tea Association, said that the *biluochun* trees are grown among fruit trees so that it features

a unique natural floral and fruity tone.

"Premium *biluochun* is sold at 9,000 yuan (\$1,340) per kilo," he said. "Some will even be sold as high as 24,000 to 36,000 yuan a kilogram."

Today, *biluochun* is also planted in Zhejiang and Sichuan province, but the tea leaves are larger and the taste is nuttier.

The best harvesting season for the tea is generally considered to be before the Qingming Festival, making it one of the earliest green tea varieties to hit the market every year. This particular timing is what is believed to give the dry tea leaves

a coat of small white "hairs", which is essential for high-grade *Biluochun*.

Local people pluck only the earliest buds to get the best flavor. For the high-grade *biluochun*, one kilogram of dry tea requires as many as 14,000 to 15,000 tea shoots, as the buds are so delicate and tender.

*Biluochun* is usually brewed two or three times, with different aroma and taste each time and since the tea-making process does not include a fermentation procedure, *biluochun* maintains its natural antioxidants.

Zhang Shaowei contributed to this story.

### Local "rock" star grows Wuyi Mountain trade

By **HU MEIDONG** in Fuzhou  
and **XIN WEN** in Beijing

Around Wuyi Mountain in south China's Fujian province, April marks the beginning of tea picking season, a period that lasts more than a month and a time when visitors from all over the country come seeking what they consider to be the best tea.

The mountains where tea trees are grown provide an extra bonus for connoisseurs of the leafy infusion, as they mostly boast pristine landscape and scenery. Among the tea trees planted around Wuyi Mountain, *dahongpao*, is perhaps the most famous variety.

Famed for its rich, long-lasting aroma, *dahongpao* is a traditional tea that is made from the foliage of trees that grow in rocky gullies nearby streams and rivers.

A mild climate is a prerequisite for growing the tea trees and abundant rainfall is necessary which is how Wuyi Mountain became the best place for cultivating such "rock tea" varieties.

More than 800 kinds of tea tree have been planted in the Wuyi Mountain region and the area has become the origin of many diversified species.

Tea has become the brand and image of Nanping city, which is home to the UNESCO Natural and Cultural Heritage site where Wuyi Mountain is located. Its fame has been widely celebrated both at home and abroad.

Tea has gradually grown into to an industry that has helped boost rural revitalization plans to take advantage of the natural resources, fisheries and plantations.

Xu Weize, former mayor of Nanping, said earlier last year that its

counties and villages will focus on improving tourism services.

"We are dedicated to building Wuyi Mountain into a world-class tourist destination, and there are plans in place to develop more bed-and-breakfast establishments and eateries that will help to drive up employment and income among the locals," he said.

More than 80,000 villagers are involved in the tea industry, accounting for one third of the area's total population. The total value of the local tea industry has reached 2.1 billion yuan (\$318.2 million).

More than a money spinner, the sought after leaf also stands out as a symbol of the tranquil, spiritual life enjoyed by many through the brewing and sipping of tea.

Such a lifestyle is considered a luxury by many urbanites and, thus, lures them back again and again, not only for the opportunity to enjoy the restorative beverage, but to get away from their hectic city lives.

It has created a boom in what has been dubbed as "slow travel".

Itineraries of such "slow travel" getaways include hiking through the lush forests — which are home to many mammal and bird species, as well as 2,200 categories of flora — along with a quintessential tea experience which starts with a visit to the plantation, and finishes with a tea tasting.

A special tea competition, which involves a number of tea experts picking the best produce of the year by examining the color of the beverage and the lasting effect of the taste, is also open to tourists.

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### Coveted "fuzz tip" is the peak for connoisseurs

By **ZHU LIXIN** in Huangshan, Anhui  
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Huangshan *maofeng* is one of the most pricey and sought-after green tea varieties in China. Despite its name, which literally means fuzz tip from Yellow Mountain, a mountain range with an area of 160 square kilometers in east China's Anhui province, it remains a controversy which part of the mountain, characterized by its oddly-shaped peaks, pines and clouds, boasts the best produced example of the tea.

The most common consensus, agreed by both local tea-makers and tea connoisseurs around the country, is that a small town in the southern part of the mountains, called Fuxi, is the birthplace of the tea.

The tender, needle-like infusion is believed to have originated in the late 19th century, when a local merchant tried to make a living in a remote village after becoming a war refugee. By creating a unique tea baking technique, the mer-

chant, Xie Zhengang, managed to turn the leaves of an obscure plant into a beverage coveted in big cities like Shanghai, which even now still takes five hours to reach by road.

The success of Xie in popularizing the tea in Shanghai has been so great, that Caoyi Road in Shanghai was named after Xie's hometown.

But Wu Weiguo, a local tea expert who has been studying the plantation and the history of the tea variety for nearly three decades, attributed the charm of the drink, which features a subtle floral tone, to its ecology rather than its processing technique. That's why the tea can be only labeled as Huangshan *maofeng* when its raw leaves are produced in the region, regardless of how they are picked, baked or dried.

The moist clouds ringing the mountain have eroded the granite — which is the major composition of the mountain — into 88 peaks of up to 1,900 meters. The magic hand of

nature has turned some of the peaks into sculptures, seemingly carved painstakingly by human hands. It has made the area one of the most famous natural landscapes in China, attracting millions of hikers.

On the other hand, the clouds are also believed to form a natural layer of shelter, blocking the sunlight and allowing the tea leaves to produce more nitrogen content and their distinctive aroma.

Though, Wu admitted, it might be difficult for average drinkers to tell the difference between native *maofeng* tea leaves and "transplanted ones" in other regions.

Official tea picking season this year is scheduled to begin on April 8 and will kick off with a special ceremony.

More than just an event on a local agricultural calendar, tea picking has also grown into an added attraction for tourists to travel and visit the mountain in springtime, as there is a reignited interest in the traditional beverage, which already

boasts thousands of years of history in China.

As melted snow refills the creeks and brings waterfalls back to life, and budding flowers paint a colorful contrast against Hui-style architecture, — one of the most celebrated building styles in China — Huangshan in spring has always been in favor among tourists. The newly curated experiences of tea picking and processing have provided tourists another reason to stay for a couple of days more, according to officials of the local tourism bureau.

For those who want to increase their tea trivia and knowledge of the local leaf, a museum run by the sixth-generation descendants of Xie is a fascinating place to visit. First opened in 2006 and later expanded to a whopping 7,000 square meters, supplemented by a tea garden, the museum offers a detailed review of the cultivation of *maofeng* and how it grew to become one of the top national tea varieties over course of the last century.



### Brewing interest through ecological cultivation

By **YANG JUN** in Guizhou  
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If being newly crowned as one of the 28 must-visit destinations for the year of 2019 isn't enough to visit Fanjing Mountain in Southwest China's Guizhou province, there is one more attraction that might lure visitors — its green tea named *cuifeng*, meaning emerald-colored pinnacles in Chinese.

Described as "a sacred Buddhist site and a place rewarding hikers with bizarre rock formations and above-the-clouds views" by the National Geographic Traveller magazine, which compiled the list, Fan-

ging Mountain is at an altitude of around 2,500 meters and remains one of the country's least polluted areas.

Now the biggest tea grower both by size and volume in the country, Guizhou processed 362,000 tons of tea in 2018, according to statistics provided by the provincial agricultural department. That amount is almost three times that of the United Kingdom's annual consumption of tea in 2017.

"Our agronomy used to struggle with our unique geography and climate characteristics, which can be described as no three consistent days of sunshine, and no three

adjoined *mu* of flat fields," said Hu Jicheng, vice-director of the province's agriculture department.

"But the tea industry is actually blessed by such characteristics, since high altitude and a moist climate helps nurture good tea," he added.

However, instead of highlighting a certain variety or tea with a delicate aroma, the agriculture department promotes the area's pollutant- and chemical-free features as its cutting edge to compete with some of the more famous tea producers in other provinces.

According to Hu, the province has raised the number of prohibited

pesticides on tea plants to 120 types, the highest in the country.

Also, by incorporating tea plantations with forests, an ecological balance has been naturally created to grow "clean tea", as Hu put it.

In the case of Fanjing Mountain, which is home to 382 vertebrate species, including wild pandas, clouded leopards and the planet's largest habitat of gray snub-nosed monkeys — 700 in total — the nature reserve has been dubbed one of the most well preserved "green reservoirs" in the world.

Its rich biodiversity also earned it a place on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites last year.



With a tea-growing history dating as far back as the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), villages in the mountainous region have largely relied on the production of tea to get out of poverty.

Last year, the local government

organized its first International Matcha Culture Festival, as part of its efforts to not only upgrade its tea processing industry, but to also encourage more tourists to come and sip tea amid the phantasmagoric beauty of Fanjing Mountain.