

How Organic is Your Tea?

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As you are reading this article, the [2009 Spring Flush \(harvest\)](#) should be well underway. According to the Chinese lunar calendar, there are predictions of an early spring season. My first tea tour of the year will be spent watching thousands of villagers out laboring in the fields, valleys and up on the mountain slopes, picking the emerging, tender young bud shoots and leaves from the tea shrubs in the Zhejiang and Anhui provinces. I am certain that during this time, I am sure to be asked the question "Are these teas organic?"

Generally speaking, *lu de chun cha* (spring flush green tea) is considered to be the sweetest-tasting crop of the year. Higher-grade popular green teas, such as the famous *Xi Hu Long Jing Cha* (*Westlake Dragon Well Tea*) and my personal favorite *Tai Ping Hou Kui* from *Yellow Mountain in Anhui*, sell for considerably higher prices than other picks of the year. ([Fall Flush oolongs are certainly the exception](#) to this, as they are prized for having depth of character with a bold taste that hits hard.) For this reason, it is common that teas other than spring crops are sold as Spring Flush, in hopes of catching a higher price.

Even though the natural beauty of many pristine tea-growing areas of the country are stunning, the rapid rate of modernization and increased sophistication that has taken place during the past 10 years of traveling and living here is absolutely mind-boggling. Along with this expansion and increased productivity, modern agricultural practices are quickly replacing traditional methods. For example, the largest corn-producing operation in Asia is a joint venture between the Heilongjiang provincial government and a [huge American multi-national agricultural corporation](#).

The fact is, unfortunately, this westernization of China includes the inevitable use of pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. I am sure that if you are a tea enthusiast, you have heard that there are now certified organic standards in China; very impressive indeed!

Generally speaking, tea is a very minimally processed food product. This is particularly so with green tea, because it is usually a fresh-picked leaf that has been merely sun dried or oven-baked, without the addition of flavorings, spices or preservatives. Red (black) teas, *shu pu-erh* and green oolongs are aged/oxidized/fermented, by a steaming process, prior to drying. Most of these tea leaves are not even rinsed with water during their processing. If a tea leaf was directly sprayed with a chemical, the beverage would have a nasty bitter or sour taste that would be disgustingly undrinkable. So, the likelihood of that happening is extremely low.

Most of my free time here in Shanghai during the past four years has been spent hanging out with people from all over the tea-growing provinces who wholesale their hometown products. I go out to these villages to vacation and continue to learn from these people. They have explained to me that the biggest problem is with insects because most of the shrubs are fairly fungus-resistant, thus pesticides are used. Fungicides and herbicides are usually not used (weeds are usually pulled up by hand due to cheap labor).

It is mostly during the summer months that the insects attack. Last September, I was revisiting a

very famous tea garden where the insects had a bad case of the "munchies"! I saw some shrubs that were 30 percent devoured. This was after the summer crop had been picked. The plants were being sprayed at that time. The villagers were picking any remaining bright green new-growth leaves that had not been picked during the recent harvest and dropping them on the ground. This assured that they would not be picked during the next crop.

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