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The Night the World's Top Tea and Wine Geeks Got Crazy

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BY ROWAN JACOBSEN



On a sweltering Monday night, the Chinese-language scholar Victor Mair and I walked into a Bushwick photo studio littered with the shrapnel of a *Bon Appetit* shoot earlier that day. Amidst the props, a long table held ten people, chatting softly. I had secret crushes on half of them. There was [Alice Feiring](#), flame-haired natural-wine firebrand. There was [Sebastian Beckwith](#), the Himalayan trekker turned New York tea guru. Billy Smith, sommelier at [Semilla](#) and [The Four Horsemen](#), was shrouding bottles of Champagne in foil, and, good god, was that [Peter Liem](#) sitting quietly in the corner? I didn't recognize the blond Viking boiling multiple kettles and breaking up a disc of pu'er tea, but it had to be Two Dog, one of the only westerners producing pu'er tea in Yunnan, China. Two Dog never shows his face online ([this is as close as it gets](#)), but [some of his teas](#) are cult obsessions.

We were here for the first-ever Dialogue of Wine and Tea, the unlikely vision of Adrienne Anderson,

who owned the studio. In her spare time, Anderson curates an online tea-culture bazaar called Local Technique featuring the work of Chinese tea artisans. “I’ve been fascinated by *The Dialogue of Wine and Tea* ever since I came across a French translation in a little bookshop in Paris years ago,” she said as Billy Smith poured Champagne. “I liked that it was this fight between two inanimate things, and I was in love with the idea that it had never been translated into English. Of course,” she sighed, glancing at Victor Mair, “I was wrong.”

The Dialogue of Wine and Tea is a thousand-year-old Tang Dynasty text, discovered in a cave in western China, in which Wine Personified and Tea Personified debate their merits. (Tea: “Monks of great virtue drink me to dispel dullness and weariness.” Wine: “I induce people to strum the lute and beat the jug, but you can’t get singers and dancers to come perform for a cup of tea.”) Mair, a tea devotee since his stint in the Peace Corps in Nepal in 1965, included a translation in the appendix of his 2009 book *The True History of Tea*.

Anderson’s idea was to redo the dialogue, Bushwick-style. Tea nerds, wine nerds; *discuss*. “There’s something about the people these two drinks attract,” she said. I scanned the table. Natural-wine lovers resemble doomed but passionate members of the French Resistance from some WWII flick—you expect them to leap to their feet and belt out “La Marseillaise” at any moment—while tea geeks look like they stumbled out of a Wes Anderson film.

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Representing wine that night would be Billy Smith’s favorite Champagnes, all made in the biologically vigorous natural style. Speaking for tea would be Two Dog’s pu’er. Pu’er, which is pressed into frisbee-like “cakes” that get better and more otherworldly with age, is like the Bordeaux of China. Old cakes from methuselah trees sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction. “I went off the deep end for pu’er because it had so much complexity and intrigue,” Two Dog explained. “So many variables to try to understand.”

“Just like Champagne,” Peter Liem mused, as Billy poured a Charles Dufour Champagne with bubbles as fine as mist. A 1990s Adina Howard tune wafted in the background. Billy took us through something crazy and old from Andre Beaufort, then a blast of golden winter from Michel Fallon that had even Peter Liem, who friggin lives in Champagne, scribbling like a monk. They seemed rich and deep and a little bit wistful, as good Champagne always does. When the last bottle was unveiled, a Jacques Selosse of which there were something like zero bottles ever produced, I heard somebody weeping softly.

“I find a certain kind of energy in natural wines like these,” Billy said. “Call it what you want. Purity. Rusticity. There’s something about these wines that translates as *life*.” Two Dog nodded. “Raw pu’er tea is exactly like that. There are certain teas where you take one sip and you’re like, ‘Yeah, I’m in for whatever.’ And there are others where you take a sip and you’re like, ‘Fuck this.’”

He passed cups of a tea called Last Thoughts. I was in for whatever. It tasted like weathered driftwood. “Don’t think about what it tastes like,” he told us. “Pay attention to how it makes your body feel.” The wine people eyed him suspiciously. We slurped. We thought about how we felt.

Cup after cup of pu’er came around. The driftwood turned to camphor. More important, the microdepression I’d fallen into when the Champagne ran out—Champagne is all about time and loss, the bubbles ticking like a goddamn metronome—lifted as ten cups of pu’er left me wildly optimistic about the future, or at least the rest of the night.

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Two Dog brewed a new tea called The Treachery of Storytelling, Part 2. It’s his comment on the rampant fraud in the pu’er industry, which sells far more “old arbor” pu’er than could possibly exist. In a nod to Magritte, the wrapper says THIS IS NOT OLD ARBOR PU’ER. But I suspect it is. He refuses to disclose the sources of the tea, to sell samples, or even to include tasting notes. You’re either in or your not. It costs \$838 per pound.

Treachery Pt. 2 was bitter and strange. “To me, there’s a lift right here,” said Two Dog, running his finger up his forehead. “I feel it in my internal organs.” But Alice Feiring was like, Fuck this. “I can’t get this one down,” she said. “The fragrance is so foreign. It tastes like artichoke water. Soapy artichoke water.”

There was an uneasy silence at the table.

“That’s a very true response,” Two Dog offered. We all thought some more about how we felt.

The original *Dialogue of Wine and Tea* ends when Water arrives and says (my paraphrase), “Shut up you idiots! It’s all about me, anyway.” We were saved around 3 AM when Scotch materialized, in the form of a twelve-year-old bottle of Springbank, and said (my paraphrase), “Oooyrrwrangghamdruth!” Everybody filled tumblers.

I asked Anderson for her last thoughts. “Last thoughts?” she replied. “I’ve only begun to have first thoughts. Woody Guthrie summed it up: ‘If you want to learn something, just steal it.’”

Two Dog drained his glass and made a happy noise. “Springbank is the mother fucking truth,” he declared. Nobody disagreed.

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TOPICS: Alice Feiring, Billy Smith, Bon Appetit, Brooklyn, bushwick, Peter Liem, Pu'er, puer tea, Sebastian Beckwith, tea, The Dialogue of Wine and Tea, The Four Horsemen, Two Dog

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