

MIJOLOGÍA APLICADA

Lapsang Souchong

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Mijología

(mi.jo.lo.gí.a) n. (Spanish)

Etym. From the Spanish term mijo, an affectionate expression of closeness used in several Latin American countries, and the combining form -logía, from the Greek -logía, meaning "study," "treatise," or "discipline."

1. A discipline that studies lifelong learning as a process of exchanging knowledge, experiences, and perspectives among lifelong learners.
2. An approach based on the idea that every person can be both teacher and learner, regardless of age, experience, position, or specialization.

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Letter from the editor

Exactly one year ago, while receiving a Tea Wisdom, these words were given to me:

“The purpose must be holistic. It is about reaching as complete an understanding as possible of whatever we are exploring, learning, or experiencing. To do so, it is not enough to approach it from a technical or intellectual perspective; we must also involve the senses, both through conscious perception and through the innate sensory response that arises spontaneously. And it is not only about recognizing how something makes us feel or what our reaction to it may be; we must also learn to step back and observe it beyond our own experience.”

And alongside them, there were other words that, over time, I have come to understand differently:

“I do not want your journey with tea to be the same as mine. Nor would it make sense for it to be. Your journey must be your own, shaped by your experiences, your questions, your discoveries, and your own way of relating to tea.”

This volume of *Mijología Aplicada*, in a way I never expected and find deeply rewarding, distills what was once a Tea Wisdom.

Although this volume is dedicated to Lapsang Souchong (to its history, its flavor, its processes, and everything surrounding it) personally, it reminded me of something I may have forgotten: tea is not cultivated only in the soil. It also grows within all those people who have allowed it to take root inside them.

The plant, in the end, is not always the teacher. More often, it simply acts as a catalyst. It becomes a meeting point between people, their experiences, their questions, their mistakes, and their discoveries. It is what allows us to sit across from someone and begin a conversation that may eventually lead us to something far greater than a leaf.

And perhaps that is one of the things that attracts me most to tea: what we believe we are studying is not always what we ultimately end up learning.

I once heard a statement that, at the time, seemed almost unreal to me: “Tea people are good people.”

No one refuted it, although the expressions on some faces seemed to suggest otherwise. I must admit that, personally, my position leaned more toward the negative.

Today, however, I see it differently.

I cannot say that all tea people are good people. That would be too simple, and probably too naïve.

But I do have the pleasure of saying that, so far, every person who has shared their Tea Wisdom with me has done so with good intentions. People who, through a conversation, a cup, a question, or a story, have left something growing inside me.

Perhaps that is why this volume feels like umami. It fills you yet leaves an emptiness. An emptiness that does not ask to be filled but explored.

It would have been enough for us

Although I do not yet know what this anniversary has in store for the guests who are still to come, I have to say that if I had only managed to bring together the voices of three guests, Ryan, Sam, and, on this occasion, Vernon, it would have been enough for me.

Because through these conversations, without having sought it out or planned it in advance, this anniversary has managed to distill a theme that is as simple as it is complex: culture.

With Ryan and Sam, we explored matcha, a tea that has received a considerable amount of attention, both among those who were already part of the tea world and among those who found in it their first gateway into tea. With Vernon, however, the conversation took us somewhere else.

Because the world of tea, precisely because it is a mosaic, is made up of many other teas, each with its own challenges, stories, and significance. And perhaps that is where one of its greatest riches lies: we are not talking about a static culture, but a living one, one that changes, adapts, transforms, and continues to be shaped by the people who cultivate it, study it, and share it.

Today, we have the pleasure of getting to know Vernon Harris.

Vernon has travelled to 84 countries, lived in nine, and speaks six languages, a background that shows up in how he talks about tea. Five years ago he moved into the specialty tea trade, joining one of China's largest tea companies as a supplier to the hospitality sector. As a partner manufacturer, the company delivers premium raw teas to more than 3,000 partners across China, growing and sourcing all 6 types of tea, which gave Vernon a front row seat to every link in the supply chain, from the hillside to the cup.

Last year he took that experience to the UK and founded [Sinovate](#), built around a simple goal: bring genuinely well-made Chinese teas to British drinkers who want the real thing. Lapsang Souchong sits at the heart of his portfolio fittingly, since it's also one of the hardest teas to bring into the country, given how closely UK and EU customs scrutinize it. Vernon's approach has been to build direct relationships with trusted producers so that quality and compliance move together rather than against each other.

Beyond the business side, Vernon serves as Board Director for Education at the [European Specialty Tea Association \(ESTA\)](#), where he's currently shaping a new generation of educational programmes aimed at deepening how Europeans understand and appreciate specialty tea.



The Seasoning

I felt a certain sadness when I discovered that one of the first search results that appears (at least for me) when you type “Lapsang Souchong” is an article that speaks of the beauty of this tea primarily in terms of its ability to add flavor to cooking and baking.

And yes, Lapsang Souchong can certainly bring flavor to the life of those who drink it. But, as with so many things in life, I believe that part of its beauty also lies in understanding it: knowing where it comes from, how it is made, why it tastes the way it does, and what story lies behind what ultimately finds its way into our cup.

That is why the first thing I asked Vernon was:

What is Lapsang Souchong, and what makes it special?

Since many people have heard of Lapsang Souchong, but few know its history, what exactly is it, and what makes it so special?

Vernon explained it this way:

"Lapsang Souchong comes from Tongmu, a small area tucked into the Wuyi Mountains of Fujian Province widely credited as the birthplace of black tea itself, with roots stretching back to the early 17th century, near the end of the Ming Dynasty.

The story of how it came to be is part accident, part necessity.

During a period of military unrest, local tea makers found themselves with a batch of freshly picked leaves and no time to dry them properly before they'd spoil.

Their solution was to speed things along over burning pinewood. What came out the other side was nothing like the tea anyone had tasted before, smoky, deep, and strangely compelling.

When it reached Britain, it found fans almost immediately. The smokiness wasn't a hard sell to a country already fond of kippers, bacon, and smoked cheese, and its popularity only grew once word spread that the Royal family had taken a liking to it.

People often describe it as tasting like a campfire in a cup, bold pine smoke wrapped around notes of malt, dried longan, dark honey, and a faint warmth reminiscent of whisky.

Whether it becomes a lifelong favourite or stays an acquired taste, it's rarely a tea anyone forgets.

In short, we met someone whose journey has allowed him to experience and understand every link in the supply chain, and we came closer to a tea that can feel like a campfire in a cup yet is sometimes reduced to little more than a seasoning.

This is precisely why it becomes imperative to pause and consider what we truly mean by authenticity when we talk about Lapsang Souchong; that is,

What makes a Lapsang authentic?

Is it determined by its origin, traditional production methods, flavor profile, or something else?

Vernon points out that, in this case, authenticity rests on three pillars, and all three must remain firmly in place: **origin, production, and flavor.**

Where does it come from?

A genuine Lapsang Souchong originates in Tong Mu Village, in the Wuyi Mountains. In China, the region holds Protected Geographical Indication status, a form of legal recognition similar to that granted to certain wines and cheeses in Europe. The Wuyi Mountains themselves are also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In Tong Mu Village, approximately 455 hectares are devoted to tea cultivation, spread across 343 producers. To put that into perspective, that is just over 1,100 acres.

How is it made?

The leaves are first withered and then smoked over pinewood fires, traditionally using Masson pine (*Pinus massoniana*).

Achieving a level of smokiness that is present without becoming overwhelming is a skill that typically takes years of practice.

What does it taste like?

A well-made Lapsang Souchong balances the fragrant smokiness of pine with the tea's natural sweetness, accompanied by notes of malt, dried longan, and honey, followed by a clean finish.

Less expensive versions often rely on artificial smoke flavorings or excessively heavy smoking, resulting in a flatter profile dominated by a single note.

Put simply: a protected origin, an honest production process, and a naturally balanced result. Remove any one of these three elements, and what remains is no longer entirely authentic.



A conversation beyond the cup

From this point on, we invite you to join the conversation.

Below, you will find the interview presented in a question-and-answer format. To make it easier to read, the questions will be highlighted in **bold**, while the answers are Vernon's.

V: Vernon

This interview aims to remain as faithful and close as possible to Vernon's original responses. However, as part of the editorial process, some adjustments have been made to the structure, order, and wording to improve readability and maintain the flow of the text, without altering the meaning of the ideas he expressed.

More than a simple collection of questions and answers, this section seeks to preserve the essence of the conversation: Vernon's reflections, nuances, and perspectives on Lapsang Souchong, its history, production, evolution, and the future of this tradition within tea culture.

Join us in this exchange of ideas.

Lapsang Souchong is often described as a tea that divides opinion.

What does it take to truly appreciate it?

Is it a matter of experience, curiosity, cultural context, or something else entirely?.

V: There are a few things that tend to come together before someone truly falls in love with this tea.

First, a certain openness to flavors that do not follow the usual rules of black tea. The smoke can take first-time drinkers by surprise, and sometimes quite intensely.

Second, a little context helps. Once you understand that the smoky character is intentional, the result of genuine craftsmanship rather than an accident caused by over-processing, the tea begins to make more sense. And that, in turn, creates room to appreciate everything happening beneath that initial impression. It also happens to be an excellent companion to smoked meats, aged cheeses, grilled foods, and dark chocolate.

Third, much like whisky or a good espresso, it is a tea that rewards repetition. The first impression can be intense (more than one person has joked that it tastes like “drinking from an ashtray”) but familiarity allows you to discover how the pine smoke integrates into a much more complex profile, revealing notes of dried fruit, sweet malt, and a subtle touch of honey.

However, this is where the story is beginning to change.

Truly artisanal Lapsang Souchong, smoked with pinewood, is becoming increasingly difficult to find outside China, largely because the limits established by European Union food safety regulations make it difficult for traditional smoking methods to pass customs controls. And this scarcity is likely to deepen rather than disappear.

It is also possible that this is a tea that can never be reproduced with complete precision once pinewood smoking disappears. The wood itself is part of the chemistry of the process; it is not simply a source of flavor.

What is more realistic, and what some Chinese producers are already working toward, is developing a close modern equivalent: one designed to pass import controls without exception, while remaining sufficiently close to the original that most consumers would have difficulty telling them apart.

It will not be the same tea. But perhaps it will be the tea that allows this style to survive.

And we, as consumers, will probably have to learn to see it less as an imitation and more as the next chapter in the same story.

With so many interpretations of Lapsang Souchong currently on the market,

What should consumers look for when deciding where to buy it?

What should they look for in a tea vendor, and what are the most common red flags?

V: Good packaging and confident marketing copy won't tell you much.

The vendors worth trusting are the ones willing to talk specifics, where the tea comes from, how it was made, and why it tastes the way it does.

Signs of a trustworthy source:

1. Names the actual origin; Tongmu specifically, or at minimum the Wuyi Mountains
2. Describes pinewood smoking as a process, not just a flavour note
3. Shares details on the producer, harvest timing, and processing method without being pressed
4. Talks about balance; sweetness, malt, dried fruit, honey, not smoke alone
5. Prices it like the labour intensive, small-batch product it actually is

Signs to be cautious of:

1. No clear origin mentioned
2. Authenticity claimed but nothing to back it up
3. A price that seems too good for genuine Tongmu tea
4. Tasting notes that stop at "smoky" with nothing else said
5. No harvest date or sourcing information at all

If you can, ask for a sample before committing to a larger purchase, a merchant confident in what they're selling will usually welcome the question.

And be wary of organic certification claims specifically: excellent organic Chinese black teas do exist, but traditional Tongmu Lapsang Souchong rarely carries that label, since certification and traditional smoking don't always sit easily together.

Judge the tea as a whole, (origin, craft, traceability, and taste) rather than leaning on any single claim.

Evolution or tradition? Is there really a choice?

Lapsang Souchong has survived wars, shifting tastes, and centuries of history. Today, it faces modern regulations. Does its future lie in preserving tradition, embracing innovation, or finding a balance between the two?

V: This isn't really a fork in the road between old and new, it's a matter of getting both to work together.

EU limits on polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and anthraquinone compounds, both of which can form during pinewood smoking, have pushed producers to get more precise: tighter control over smoking temperature, duration, and airflow, aimed at cutting unwanted compounds without losing the tea's character. That's refinement, not retreat.

The market is splitting in a useful way.

Collectors and purists can still seek out traditionally smoked, artisan-made tea through specialist merchants who manage the compliance side carefully. Meanwhile, a growing group of producers is developing lighter or more tightly controlled smoking styles built to satisfy modern regulation from the outset, including versions increasingly engineered to clear customs inspection reliably, every time, rather than depending on the tea passing after the fact.

None of this is really new for Lapsang Souchong. It has changed before, shaped by circumstance, science, and shifting expectations.

This is simply its next adaptation.

You once wrote:

“The global tea industry does not run on romance, but on paperwork.”

The romance of tea is experienced by the consumer, while the burden of keeping that romance alive (regulatory compliance, documentation, testing, and logistics) falls on producers and vendors. Is this disconnect a communication problem, a lack of consumer interest, or an inevitable reality of the modern supply chain?

V: A little of all three, although primarily the last one.

It is understandable that brands begin with the romance: mountain landscapes, centuries-old techniques, and the hands of the tea master. That is what draws people in. Laboratory tests and customs paperwork are hardly compelling campaign material, even though that unglamorous work is precisely what allows the romantic version of the story to reach a shelf legally and safely.

Most consumers care, in principle, about authenticity and safety, but few actively seek out the technical details behind them. That means transparency has to be offered, not simply made available somewhere for those willing to look for it.

The vendors who inspire the most trust tend to proactively share information about origin and testing, treating it as part of the story rather than as a footnote.

At the same time, the tea trade has changed. Today, exporters must contend with pesticide residue limits, restrictions on PAHs, traceability requirements, and multiple layers of customs documentation that did not exist a generation ago. All of this adds cost and friction, but it also helps keep the global tea supply safe and reliable.

None of this really contradicts the romance. The pinewood fires and mountain villages are just as real as they have always been. The paperwork is simply what allows that story to keep traveling.

The opportunity for the industry lies not in choosing between heritage and compliance, but in learning how to tell both sides of the same story.

Markets with greater purchasing power tend to impose the strictest standards, but producers are usually the ones who bear the cost of meeting them.

Is the trade asking producers to solve problems that importing markets are unwilling to help finance?

V: There's a real imbalance here, and it's worth naming plainly.

The UK and EU require screening across more than 560 potential contaminants, alongside pesticide residue limits and traceability rules trying to make them sensible, legitimate protections for consumers. But the cost of meeting them requires new equipment, lab testing, quality systems, documentation, staff training etc and costs usually lands on the producers and exporters, many of whom are small operations working on thin margins.

Some of that cost eventually shows up in retail pricing, but producers absorb a significant share themselves, especially in price-sensitive markets where passing costs along isn't always realistic.

So the standards protect consumers, but the investment to meet them falls disproportionately on the people growing and processing the tea.

A fairer system would likely involve premium pricing that actually reflects compliance costs, better access to affordable testing, more technical support for producers, and closer cooperation between exporting regions and the markets buying from them.

Rigorous food safety and traditional craftsmanship aren't natural enemies, but making that relationship sustainable means sharing the cost of it more evenly.

Can tradition and sustainability coexist, or are there moments when preserving heritage means rethinking how traditions are practised?

V: They're not opposites, though getting them to align sometimes takes deliberate adjustment.

A lot of traditional tea-making is already sustainable by nature: shade grown cultivation, hand plucking, biodiverse gardens that have supported both land and community for generations. Those practices deserve to stay exactly as they are.

Other traditions now operate in a different world. Pinewood smoking is the clear example. It has to satisfy today's environmental and food safety standards, which weren't a consideration when the method was first developed. Rather than discarding it, many producers are fine-tuning temperature, airflow, and duration to preserve the character of the tea while reducing what modern regulation flags as a problem.

Heritage was never actually static. Tea making has shifted before, in response to climate, technology, and changing markets. What survives isn't every individual technique it's the underlying commitment to quality and authenticity that those techniques were built to protect.

So the real task isn't freezing every old method in place. It's holding onto the intent behind it. If a technique can be improved without losing what made the tea recognisable in the first place, that's not a compromise, it's exactly how traditions like Lapsang Souchong stay alive long enough to matter to the next generation.

What is your Tea Wisdom?

The question doesn't necessarily have to be about tea. You could answer it as "What would you tell your younger self?" or "What is your philosophy of life?" At its core, it's about a lesson from your career or your life that you wish more people knew.

V: If tea has taught me anything, it's this:

**"Slow down, the best cup
is rarely the fastest one."**

As an example, in China the process before drinking tea is much slower than in the west.

We wash the tea first, then pour it into a pot, then into a glass jug to pour it into the small cup. There are specific reasons for this which I can share here.

This is the Gongfu tea drinking method and why each step exists in Gongfu style brewing:

The wash (rinse)

The first brief steep, is for a few seconds, then it is discarded.

It's not really about hygiene, though it does knock off any dust. Its main job is to rinse away the slightly stale, dry surface flavour that dust and compressed/rolled leaves pick up in storage, and it helps to "wake up" the leaf: opening the surface so the real infusion that follows extracts evenly and fully from the first proper steep onward.

The teapot (or gaiwan)

This is where the actual steeping happens.

With short, precise infusions, often 10 - 30 seconds each, repeated many times over a session, since Gongfu brewing relies on more leaf and much shorter, more numerous steeps than Western style brewing.

The fairness pitcher

This is the clever bit.

If you poured straight from the pot into each small cup one at a time, the first cup poured would be weaker (less contact time, more diluted) and the last cup would be stronger and more bitter (leaves keep steeping the whole time you're pouring).

The pitcher solves this: you pour the entire infusion out of the pot in one go, which does two things.

It stops the leaves from over steeping in the pot, and it mixes the tea so that every small cup poured from it afterward tastes identical, regardless of who gets poured first or last. That's the "fairness" in the name (literally), no guest gets a worse cup than anyone else.

The small cups

Small by design each with a few sips' worth, so the tea is drunk while still hot and fresh, and so you can cycle through many steeps in one sitting, noticing how the flavour evolves infusion by infusion (which is much of the point of Gongfu tea in the first place).

The whole sequence, wash, steep, fairness pitcher, cup isn't ceremony for ceremony's sake; it's a fairly practical system built around getting consistent, well timed flavour out of leaves brewed far more concentrated and repeatedly than most Western tea drinkers are used to.

We've covered smoke, craft, regulation, and global logistics in this conversation, but underneath all of it is something simpler.

The finest teas ask for patience and this is something the Chinese are really good at. They want to make business fast, but are willing to invest for the long term gains.

Spending time in the tea cultures of China is a genuine education. Tea there isn't just something you drink; it's a way of slowing down and paying attention. It's an art and an expression of health and wealth.

Europe has its own proud tea culture, but one that has historically valued convenience over ceremony.

There's a lot to learn from the more deliberate pace that Asian tea traditions have kept for centuries.

The tea itself won't be rushed. Withering takes the time it takes.

Oxidation moves at its own pace. Smoking demands precision at every stage. Cut corners, and the result usually shows it something is missing that you can't quite name. Give it what it needs, and it rewards you with depth and balance.

I think the same holds true well beyond tea.

I think life is like that, when you have perseverance for a passion in life, success is sure to come. In learning a craft, building something, or looking after the people around you. There's rarely a shortcut that doesn't eventually show its seams. Real quality tends to be quiet about itself.

If I had two pieces of advice for anyone starting out, in tea or anywhere else, they'd be these:

1. Don't mistake speed for skill. Quality of product always wins.
2. Don't mistake tradition for a refusal to change. Tradition was never about keeping the past frozen but more about carrying its values forward into whatever comes next.

Future tea drinkers are more experimental than those of old. That is particularly so with Lapsang as we will encounter variations from tradition.

Give tea the time it deserves. Stay curious, stay adaptable, and trust that patience spent with purpose is never wasted.

The best cup is rarely the fastest one.

Glossary

A

Anthraquinone. A chemical compound that occurs naturally in various plants and is used across different industries. Some anthraquinones can be generated during certain processing methods and, depending on their concentration and level of exposure, have been associated with potential adverse effects on organs such as the liver, kidneys, lungs, and gastrointestinal tract. For this reason, their presence is subject to monitoring and evaluation as part of food safety measures. (Amarilla, 2024)

P

Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs). A group of chemical compounds formed primarily during the incomplete combustion of organic materials such as coal, petroleum, wood, tobacco, and food. They are typically found as mixtures of several compounds and may be present in materials such as soot, tar, and petroleum. Some PAHs also have industrial applications, although their presence is subject to monitoring due to their potential effects on human health. (ATSDR, 2016)

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MIJOLOGÍA APLICADA

This volume presents the interview with Vernon Harris, a guest of The Flavor Route, a section dedicated to exploring the stories, experiences, and perspectives of those who are part of the tea world.

As part of Mijología Aplicada, this interview represents an exercise in learning and knowledge exchange through the experiences, practices, and reflections of those who, from different perspectives, contribute to enriching our understanding of tea.

We preserve their contribution as part of [Satoricha's Library](#): a space dedicated to gathering and sharing diverse voices, stories, and insights related to tea and hospitality.

If you know stories, practices, or reflections that deserve to become part of this library of knowledge, we warmly invite you to [get in touch with us](#).

