Elegant, clean, and fresh in flavor, the Spring Green teas of China are known for their artistically shaped leaves. The choicest leaf configuration, mao feng, consists of two leaves of equal length and a bud; next comes mao jian, with a single leaf and a bud. Mao feng teas have a broad, flat shape and a sword-like curve from tip to end, while mao jian teas are thin and delicate, with a wiry twist to the leaf. All of these teas brew into a pale green liquid with tinges of gold; they are sweet, mild, and slightly grassy. The lyrical names of the finished Spring Green teas—Snow Dragon, Clouds and Mist, Curled Dragon Silver Tip, Rain Flower, Bubbling Spring, White Monkey Paw, Jade in the Clouds, Melon Seeds, Purple Bamboo—reflect the aesthetics of China's ancient tea culture.

The Spring Green tea season in China begins just after bud break, when the emerging leaves are still tender. The picking of these “Before the Rain Teas,” as the Chinese call them, begins in late March and continues into the second week of May. The arrival of the rains in mid- to late May momentarily stops the harvest, giving both humans and plants time to recharge. After the rains end in late June, the main tea harvest gets under way, when the bulk of China’s ordinary, commercial teas is picked. Thus, even in the best of years, the season for tender Spring Green teas is short, yielding only small amounts of precious leaf. The seasonal average for Spring Green teas is a mere ten to twelve percent of the entire green tea harvest.

The epicenter of the Spring Green tea harvest is the so-called Golden Triangle of the remote regions of Anhui, Jiangsze, and Zhejiang provinces to the west of Shanghai. The topography here is stunning, with steep, rugged mountains claiming much of the land. The most famous mountains, Huang Shan, Mogan Shan, Qi Shan, and Tianmu Shan, rise over five thousand feet and are accentuated with bamboo groves, waterfalls, and stands of pine. Their foothills are compressed in folds and pleats, with tea gardens planted in rhythmic patterns that cover the landscape in a soft green mantle. Terraced produce gardens are tucked among small rivers and rice paddies.

The common tea shrub, *Camellia sinensis*, is a specie evergreen related to the exotic flowering camellia and native to Sichuan Province. It produces the finest teas in high altitudes where sunlight, rainfall, cool breezes, and mists coax the bushes to fullness. The Chinese variety of *Camellia sinensis var. sinensis* is small and robust. Although
in the wild shrubs can grow to a height of nine feet, the cultivated plants are pruned to a manageable three and one-half foot tall by three-foot wide bush. Tea shrubs can live more than one hundred years, but they are cut back to the ground every twenty years to encourage new growth.

The recorded history of tea in China dates back to around 59 B.C. The leaves of the shrub were originally compressed into hard cakes, then broken up and boiled with a little salt, as they still are today in Tibet. During the Sung Dynasty (960–1279), leaf teas were ground into powder, then whipped to a froth in hot water. It was not until the fourteenth century that Zhu Yuan Zhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, ordered that tea leaves be infused. Since that time the Chinese have drunk elegant, whole-leaf teas. Until the early 1800s, China had a monopoly on world tea production. But in the first half of the nineteenth century, the British in India and the Dutch in Indonesia began cultivating tea to break their dependence on China.

China uses the most complicated terminology and classification of any tea-producing country, with over eight thousand distinctions for labeling and grading tea. Most of these classifications are for green teas, with a smaller number for black and oolong. Approximately twenty of the most prized—whether green, oolong, or black—are known as Famous teas. These teas are place-specific, instantly recognizable by their characteristic leaf shape and flavor. Several Famous teas are produced in the Golden Triangle. Anhui Province contributes a number of Famous teas, including three Spring Green teas: 

- *Lu Gua Pian*,
- *Huang Shan Mao Feng*,
- and the rare *Tai Ping Hou Kui*—all favored by emperors and presidents; it also produces *Qimen*, an exceptionally elegant and fragrant black tea. Jiangsu Province is known for the treasured Spring Green eyebrow tea, *Ming Mei*, which brews into a delicate, golden-green infusion with a flavor hinting of apricots and peaches. Zhejiang Province claims China’s most revered Famous tea, *Lung Ching*, the green Dragon Well tea of Hangzhou.

Over the course of the spring season, each region produces many Spring Green and several Famous teas, which differ in specific ways. First, each type of tea requires that the fresh leaf be of a certain size and configuration, such as two leaves plus one bud, or one leaf plus a bud, or a pair of leaves and no bud. Second, the drying and shaping technique used to process the leaf gives each tea its characteristic appearance. Timing is especially critical in the early Spring Green harvest, as the growing leaves change form daily, requiring continual adjustment in picking and processing. The skilled hands of the farmers, tea pickers, and leaf processors who still follow traditional methods determine the nature of each day’s crop. As with any handmade product, each freshly-picked and processed batch of tea is distinct, its nuances revealing the hand of the maker and ultimately contributing to the pleasure of the tea.

At the height of the tea season, the work is hard, the hours long. The entire village moves to the needs and rhythms of the harvest. Hours before daybreak, the tea pickers—mainly young women—fan out into the gardens, climbing long, steep paths to the harvest area. Moving deftly row by row, they slowly descend as the morning passes. Skilled tea pickers require that their fingers be long and slender for agility and reach, strong for stamina, and quick for plucking the leaf from the branch. The pickers drop the delicate leaves a handful at a time into baskets slung diagonally over their shoulders. Picking usually stops by noon, when attention turns to the village factories that process the freshly-picked leaves.

In all of the provinces, the leaves destined to become Spring Green teas are processed in essentially the same way. Each day’s harvest is treated either the same day or by the following morning. The fresh leaves are placed in large, low piles on bamboo floor mats inside the tea factory, then partially dried in a de-enzyming machine, which heats them with warm air and dries them just enough to remove excess moisture. This process prevents oxidation and keeps the leaf green, ensuring as few physical changes as possible. After this step, the leaves are set on mats to rest and cool. This partially-processed leaf is called primary tea.

Next comes the first sorting, a task usually performed by women seated at long, rectangular tables. Each woman’s workplace is marked with a painted semi-circle. From a pile in the center of the table she pulls tea into her semi-circle, working her fingertips through it to discard stems as well as torn, oversized, or oddly-shaped leaves. The sorted leaves are then brushed off the edge of the table into a basket. Each woman works for eight hours, sorting one hundred pounds of tea a day. Once sorted, the primary tea is ready
Spring Green Teas to Look For

Pi Lo Chun—Green Snail Spring
Very early, tiny leaf, pan-fired into a spiral. Brews into a clear golden liquid with a bold vegetal flavor.

Huang Hua Yun Jian—Jade in the Clouds
A long, slender, needle tea, pan-fired. Has a clean aroma and a crisp mineral flavor.

Pan Long Yin Hao—Curled Dragon Silver Tip
A thick, spiral leaf, basket-fired. Has a nutty aroma and sweet flavor.

Lu Shan Gua Pian—Lu’An Melon Seed
A large, open leaf resembling seeds, basket-fired. Brews up a deep straw color with an earthy flavor.

Quan Gang Hui Ba—Bubbling Spring Rolled Green
Loosely-halled leaves reminiscent of gunpowder green tea. Pan-fired, with a lush flavor of plums.

for the final drying, shaping, and second sorting. This processing determines the quality of the finished product, and it requires agility and skill.

Pan-firing and basket-firing are the traditional methods used for drying and hand-shaping Chinese Spring Green teas. Pan-firing is carried out in an apparatus that looks like an oversized wok built into a cement work station, heated from below by electricity or a charcoal fire. When charcoal is used, the fire-tender must work to keep the flame constant. Pan-fried teas are dried and shaped in a single operation. The pan operators are highly proficient workers who move quickly through a sequence of precise hand movements. To begin, each operator takes a bamboo scoop of primary tea from a large basket and carefully drops it into his pan. As his left hand puts down the scoop, his right hand has already begun lifting the leaves, tossing them upward several times before letting them sift through his fingers and tumble back down to the wok. He briefly presses them flat with the palm of his hand, stirs them back and forth in the pan, then presses again. He repeats the entire sequence several times, and after about eight minutes the tea is properly shaped and dried. The operator quickly scoops it out of the wok and places it in a basket to cool.

The traditional pan-firing of Lung Ching (Dragon Well) tea requires eight to ten repetitions to shape and dry it properly. Lung Ching tea acquires a long, flat, shiny appearance from the constant pressing and manipulation. The brewed tea reveals that each apparently separate tea leaf is actually two tender leaves cupped around the bud. This tea fulfills the Chinese expectation for a hand-processed tea: the brewed leaf returns to the original shape of the freshly-picked leaf, connecting the drinker to its natural source.

Like pan-firing, basket-firing is a final drying and leaf-shaping operation in one. Basket-fired tea requires a pair of workers, who move together in a smooth rhythm, lifting the basket of tea on and off of the heat source, all the while hand-shaping the leaf as it slowly dries. Tea-firing baskets are handmade by the villagers using bamboo that grows wild in the surrounding countryside. In the tea-growing regions, it is legal to cut bamboo only for making baskets and scoops. Each tea-firing basket stands about three and one-half feet tall and wide and consists of either one or two pieces. At Qi Shan, an organic tea factory in the Huo Mountains, the base is a tall, rigid cylinder that is open on the bottom. The top of the basket is low and conical, with raised sides, reminiscent of the bamboo hats that dot the hillsides when the tea pickers are out in the fields. The primary tea is spread out in the top of the basket, where it will slowly dry.

Generally, two to six baskets are in operation at once. One kilo of primary tea is put into the top of the basket, which two workers carry over to a smoldering fire. The basket remains on the heat for ten to fifteen seconds, after which it is removed. The workers fluff and stir the tea with their hands, using the wide, conical area of the basket to press gently down on the tea. They then return the basket to the heat and repeat the entire process thirty to forty times, alternating with other workers who perform the same procedure, using exactly the same steps, rhythms, and hand movements. By this traditional method, two baskets are required to produce fifty kilos of tea per day; the useful life of each basket is a mere two days. Basket-fired teas are twisted and bulkier, more wiry in shape than pan-fired teas. Because basket-firing is closer to air-drying, they are also slightly more subtle and delicate in taste. Pan-fired teas, having come into contact with the heat of the pan, have a more toasted flavor.

Although Spring Green teas command high prices that only government officials and the new business class can readily afford, the poor village farmer in tea-growing regions can still enjoy a fine brew. With the luxury of a few tea shrubs growing right outside his door, he can process his own leaf tea a few handfuls at a time in his home kitchen, using nothing more than a wok and his hands.