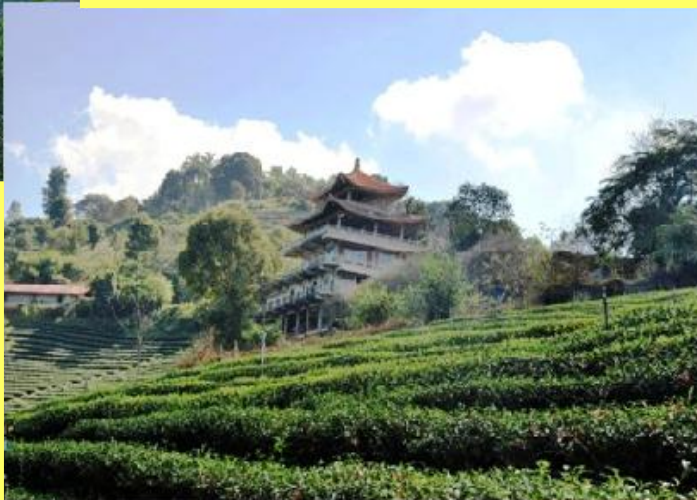


## Doi Mae Salong: Center of Tea Cultivation in Northern Thailand

Venue Doi Mae Salong, Northern Thailand, in the heart of the Golden Triangle: it is 6 a.m., when Mrs. Sumalee lifts the roller shutters of her tea-shop,

located at the main street of the town in the Northern Thai mountains that is populated exclusively by ethnic Chinese. The shelves covering three walls of her shop from the floor to the roof are packed with

tea bags of all colors and sizes, along with a broad selection of tea pottery, tea ceramics, glass ware and a variety of other tea accessories. Ms. Sumalee imports the latter from Taiwan and China, while she grows and processes the larger part of her tea portfolio herself in her tea gardens



spread in the slopes around the city. Only a few meters down the road is Mrs. Sumalee's tea factory, where she processes the freshly harvested teas, among others, to Doi Mae Salong's home brands, the Oolongs Number 12 and Number 17, which

have earned the region a permanent entry on the world map of tea cultivation in recent years and enjoy increasing popularity in the international tea lover community.

Amongst these are teas such as Jasmine or Osmanthus flower tea or a rice tea scented and flavored with Thai rice and a natural aroma donor that represents a specialty within the Northern Thai tea production, meant to

complement and diversify the company's tea portfolio. Ms. Sumalee is aided by her husband, who had worked 5 years in a Japanese sweat shop to finance the tea cultivation and processing project's initial setup,

her two daughters, and a handful of inhouse trainees the family venture recruits in the surrounding villages of indigenous hill tribes at home in Northern Thailand.





The geographic and climate conditions of Doi Mae Salong are just like tailor-made for the cultivation of tea plants. The town itself stretches across an altitude range between 1400 m and 1600 m. It is surrounded by fertile slopes, on the one side leading up to the 1800 m high peak of the Doi Mae Salong, on the other down the slopes into the valleys of the Northern Thai towns Chiang Rai and Thaton. Although Thailand is generally known as a hot tourist destination, whose beaches enjoy bright sunshine almost all year round, the temperatures here in the mountains during winter (December to February) drop down to 0° C at night. From late June until late September, the rainy season brings daily rainfalls at temperatures between 30 and 40 ° C.

The Northern Thailand traveler arriving at Doi Mae Salong immediately notices some fundamental differences here to other Northern Thai cities he has been visiting: instead of the

mostly Chinese calligraphy is found here, reaching from the common traffic sign or shop board to the labeling and scriptures on the dozens of tea shops and factories seaming both sides of the town's main street that winds through town just like a roller coaster. The spectator's eye is caught by an architecture, which isn't only different from that of other Thai towns due to the local geographic and climate requirements, but also, because it doesn't have its roots in the Thai culture at all, but in the Yunnanese culture instead.



People that are a bit familiar with the sound of the Thai language will also note that Thai is only rarely spoken here. Indeed, the people of Doi Mae Salong speak Chinese, at least when talking among each other. In addition, a visit to one of the restaurants of town soon results in the realization that none of what you've learned so far about the Thai cuisine will help you here, as the menus here exclusively consist of listings of Yunnanese culinary standards instead. It doesn't take long before the question arises in the visitor's mind, how the Chinese people got here, to this place in Northern Thailand, with their language, their architecture, their customs, their menus and, last but not least, the never-ending succession of Chinese tea shops.

Well, this story begins in the early 50s, against the background of the revolutionary army of General Chian Kai Shek, consisting of Yunnanese the border into Burmese territory by the victorious troops of Mao Tse T an opportunity for a possible military intervention in China. After a defeated Kuomintang soldiers finally split up into two main groups, home. While one of these groups came to relocated to nearby Northern settlements, of which Doi Mae Salong is the largest and most important the second group migrated to Taiwan, where the veteran soldiers found a new home in the mountains of the Alishan range.



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Just little more than 20 years ago, the hills of Doi Mae Salong, whose slopes today show a picture of one tea garden besides the other, were still covered with opium fields. Tea was a common household good in the Chinese community, but mainly imported from either Taiwan or China. Relevant sources uphold that Doi Mae Salong's Kuomintang Chinese even played a key role in the opium trade, for which the area of the Golden Triangle earned its worldwide fame. Due to regulatory pressure, the opium fields began disappearing in the early 90s and the previously ever-present poppies more and more gave way to legal agricultural products.

The inhabitants of the Chinese mountain enclaves in Northern Thailand, Doi Mae Salong and Doi Wawee, deprived of their main source of income made a virtue of necessity and bethought themselves of another, millennium-old Chinese tradition, the knowledge of the cultivation and processing of tea.

In 1994, after initial experiments with the tea plant species local to Northern Thailand, a large-leaved sub-species of *Camellia Sinensis* growing in form of trees rather than bushes, had led to unsatisfactory outcomes, the old connection to Taiwan's Alishan mountains was remembered, resulting in the import of tea plants from there, whose Oolong teas, known under the generic name Formosa Oolong teas, had already gained worldwide popularity.





Based on the particular species known as "Oolong No 17" and "Oolong No 12", a broad spectrum of tea products was gradually developed, diversified by different methods of scenting and aromatization as well as variations of the degree of fermentation and the processing method. Thus, in Mrs. Sumalee's tea shop today we find, for example, an "Oriental Beauty" Oolong tea, a "Four Seasons" Oolong tea, or even a tea bearing the name "Dong Ding Oolong Tea". Teas from Doi Mae Salong are available either in the form of loose leaves or rolled to granules, whereas the producers here have a tendency to roll higher quality teas, while medium and lower standards are more likely to be left in form of loose leaves.

At this, the processing of the different kinds of tea is done by means of astonishingly modern machinery, compared to the rather rustic appearance of town, for the heating, roasting, rolling or scenting of the tea leaves.

Meanwhile, tea gardens cover the larger part of the hills and slopes around Doi Mae Salong (a similar picture emerges in Doi Wawee), the former "Wild West" atmosphere of town has given way to a tea culture rooted in ancient tradition, and only the opium pipes, offered besides other "ethno" junk on the town's daily tourist market still remind of the "old times". Testimony of the new development is also provided by the tea monument built a few years ago amid the tea gardens outside Doi Mae Salong (the "golden" tea pot



actually accommodates a Tea Room) as well as a Tea Fair held annually for several weeks on the town's market place, where every tea grower from the area is represented with a booth, at which they present their products to the flock of visitors growing in size by the year.

The locally produced teas can be savored virtually unlimitedly in every tea shop / tea room of Doi Mae Salong. With a friendly gesture, the tea traders entice passing-by Thai and foreign tourists to enter their shops, calling out "Chim Chaa!" (Thai for "Try tea!") and asking them to sit down on one of the

low bar stools at the long counters each of the Tea Shops here is equipped with and have the products of the house served for degustation. There's no obligation or pressure to buy here. Nevertheless, in the end it's often hard to leave the tea shop without the one or other bag of tea.





For a while, the local Thai market, along with the emerging tourism, seemed to be the minimum factors for the development of tea cultivation in Doi Mae Salong, or Northern Thailand in general, for that matter. Excess tea was often traded to or via the nearby China. The cultivation area did not achieve its own reputation until just recently. However, this is about to change: particularly Northern Thai Oolong teas enjoy a continuously improving reputation in the Western tea lover community and are about to become a mandatory basic element of the portfolios of

tea traders and tea shops, but also Green Teas and latterly different qualities of Black Tea today find friends everywhere around the globe. More and more often now, expensive cars are parking in front of Mrs. Sumalee's tea shop, with European, American or even Japanese buyers in business suits peeling out of them, in order to let the tea shop owner prepare her best teas in the traditional ritual way of the Chinese tea ceremony for them and have them served for degustation.

Interesting for tea lovers in the West: the German company Siam Teas (blog: [www.thai-tee.de](http://www.thai-tee.de); Store: [www.siam-tee.de](http://www.siam-tee.de)), whose owner Thomas Kasper calls Northern Thailand his home by choice for more than two decades now, has specialized in the export and trade of teas from Northern Thailand.

