



# Special Brew

THE KING OF OOLONG TEAS IS FAST BECOMING A SOUGHT-AFTER COMMODITY. MARK MOBIUS TAKES A TRIP TO A FUJIAN MOUNTAINTOP WHERE IT HAS BEEN PRODUCED FOR CENTURIES

**W**HEN SOMEONE TOLD ME a high-end French fashion house was planning to purchase top-grade tea from Fujian province to serve to Chinese guests in its Paris boutique, I thought the case warranted further investigation. It was fortuitous that my company, Templeton, had been invited to make a private equity investment in a Fujian-based tea company. So I headed to a tea plantation in Anxi county in southern Fujian, home of the revered Tie Guan Yin (iron goddess of mercy) tea.

Although Tie Guan Yin tea originated in Anxi county, it is also produced in Nantou, Taiwan. First discovered in the 18th century in Xiping village, it is considered the best of all Oolong teas. Its dark green leaves are rolled into tight curls. One of the legends surrounding the tea tells of a scholar who discovered the tea plant under Guanyin Rock. He presented the tea to Emperor Qianlong, who was so impressed he named the

variety Tie Guan Yin after the goddess.

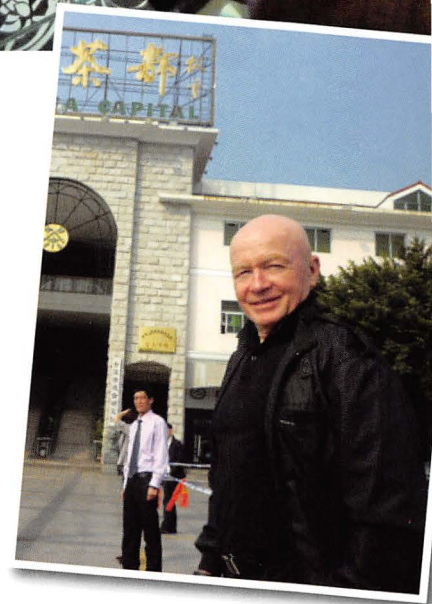
Elaborate teahouses abound in Fujian, enabling visitors to taste the tea properly prepared with hot water and traditional utensils. We had a chance to taste two kinds of Tie Guan Yin presented by a tea expert. One type had a fresh flavour, while the other was much stronger. The fresh variety uses tea that is one-third fired and fermented with a new fermentation method from Taiwan. The strong flavour type is 50 per cent fired/fermented and is used in the original Tie Guan Yin tea. Both are expensive, retailing at more than 2,000 yuan per jin (500g). Some of the tea companies have gone commercial and sell bottled Tie Guan Yin tea, which is considered lacking in class.

After sampling the varieties, we headed for a tea plantation in Daping village, Anxi county. Anxi has two districts: Inner and Outer. With its high altitude, Inner Anxi is where the best tea grows. Harvesting takes place four times a year, with the best and costliest leaves picked in autumn.

## LOFTY IDEALS

The best Tie Guan Yin tea is grown at 1,000m above sea level





#### THE TEA TRAIL CLOCKWISE

FROM TOP LEFT  
Leaves are carefully hand-picked to ensure uniformity and completeness; 500g of Tie Guan Yin can sell for more than 2,000 yuan; Mark Mobius at the Anxi tea exchange

It took more than an hour along winding roads to reach 1,000m above sea level, where the finest tea is grown. The company we visited has a plantation at the peak which is certified as organic by the government, as it was proven that there was no pollution or chemicals in the air for more than two years. These leaves are sold as “organic high-grade tea” at the company’s store.

The Anxi government’s policy is to maintain the ecological balance of the limited farmland. It requires that at least 30 per cent of farmland is reserved for forests. The company has also planted trees from the US, Japan and other countries next to their plantation. On the other side of the mountain is the Fujian Anxi National Forestry Park, which was set up as a buffer to protect the clean environment of the tea plantations.

Near the peak of the mountain, the company has a base for collecting leaves from the farmers. This substantially improves the efficiency of the workers, as they don’t need to bring their harvest all the way down to the Anxi tea exchange. The collection base also contains most of the facilities for processing, including machines for cleaning, frying and drying the leaves. It is a detailed and complex process, starting with careful picking of the leaves followed by cooling, drying, tossing and rolling. Once picked, the tea is kept indoors to cool and then moved outside to dry in the late-afternoon sun. The leaves are shaken and rubbed by hand or machine to bruise the edges and expose the juices to oxidation. This is repeated five or six times before the leaves are heated in a pan to kill enzymes and stop oxidation. They are then rolled and dried further, and put under low heat until they acquire a glossy, white surface. Finally, they are sorted to remove twigs and substandard leaves.

At the company’s collection site, we had a chance to taste their Tie Guan Yin tea with Zhou

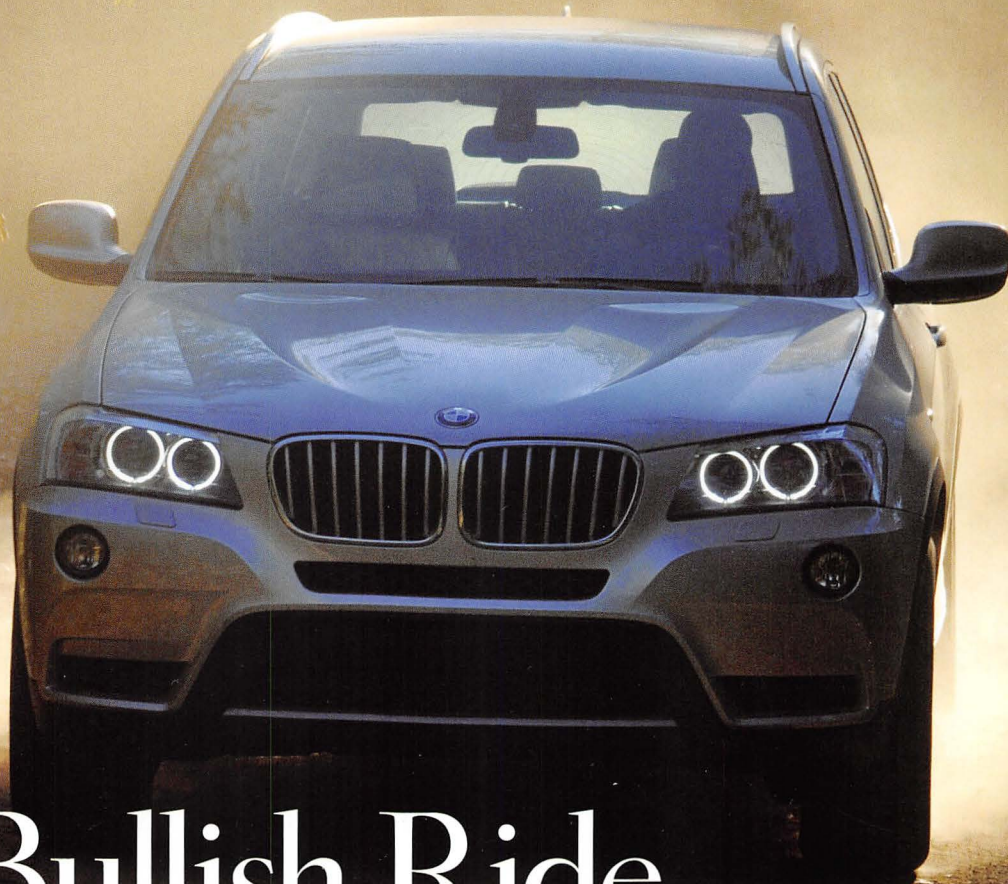
### *The best and costliest Tie Guan Yin leaves are picked in autumn*

– a government-certified senior tea assessor. He says Tie Guan Yin is the premier Oolong tea, requiring the special environmental conditions that have made Anxi county famous for the best-quality Tie Guan Yin for centuries. Over the years, quality standards have been set and they were codified in 1990. Zhou says there are two main categories for assessing the leaves: outer appearance and inner characteristics. The outer appearance includes colour; uniformity and completeness; tightness of the “tea wraps” – dried leaves wrapped into a ball; and cleanliness.

The four inner characteristics are assessed when the tea is boiled, he says. The tea is smelled to see if it has the right delicacy. It is tasted to see if it leaves a long-lasting flavour. Then it is observed to see if it has the required golden hue, influenced by the level of tea frying and fermentation. Finally, the colour, brightness and uniformity of the boiled leaves are examined.

After the visit to the plantation, we headed back down the mountain to take in the action at the bustling Anxi tea exchange. We saw farmers displaying their leaves to potential buyers, mainly for the prized autumn season tea. Although the company we visited was trying to make the process more organised and efficient by collecting tea leaves directly from the farmers, the Anxi tea exchange remains an important centre for tea trading in the region. We look forward to visiting again to sample the wonderful Tie Guan Yin tea. **T**





# A Bullish Ride

COMFORT AND OFF-ROAD PERFORMANCE ARE BOTH UNEQUIVOCALLY DELIVERED WITH PANACHE IN THE **BMW X3**, AS ANDRE LAM FINDS OUT

## IN SPORTS MODE

The new BMW X3 delivers a ride that's controlled yet high on comfort

**T**HE NEW BMW X3 HAS JUST BEEN LAUNCHED BUT many may not realise it is replacing the first generation X3 which has been in service for about seven years, making this one of the longest running of recent BMW models with well over 600,000 finding owners during that period. The X3 had held the position below the larger X5 and served as the entry-level BMW SUV until the X1 arrived.

Today's X3 is a larger SUV that addresses some of the shortcomings of the first X3. Firstly, the new look of the X3 is very coherent and handsome compared to the controversial styling of its forebear.



On this count alone, it stands out from the ever growing SUV crowd. The interior too has a more luxurious look and feel whereas the original X3 had a solid but drab utilitarian look about it. With better plastics and a more modern choice of upholstery and surface finishings, the new X3's interior feels airy and plush. Certainly much more appealing than before.

Then there was the issue of the firm and almost unsettling ride, especially for passengers. BMW was intent that its first SUVs needed to be recognised as SAVs which is BMW-speak for Sports Activity Vehicles. So, being true to form, the first X3 steered and generally handled like the marque's sporty executive sedans. Much taller than its sports sedans, the X3 needed even firmer springs to prevent it from leaning over during hard cornering, which resulted in a sporty but much firmer ride. Enthusiasts loved it, but passengers did not quite share the same affection.

Widening the new X3's stance conferred it with better stability during turns without the need to resort to firm springs. Moreover, with the latest advances in suspension technology, far more comfort could be wrought from the same basic settings than before. Today's X3 has a plush ride, trumping even its sedan stablemates. What's even more surprising is that it is shod with hard-riding run-flat