

THE GREAT green tea

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CURE-ALL





Though a venerable beverage steeped in history, green tea is suddenly a very modern and fashionable drink. The growing popularity of Japanese cuisine overseas and green tea's healthy image have helped exports increase tenfold since 1990, with those to the U.S. alone doubling between 2005 and 2006.

Here, green tea has long been valued for its health benefits. When Zen monk Eisai brought the first seeds over from China during the 12th century, his fellow monks initially imbibed in the new drink to stop from nodding off during meditation. Eisai soon detailed the brew's special properties in a book entitled, *Kissa Yojiki* (Book of tea sanitation). Attributes included acting as a stimulant, strengthening the heart and aiding digestion. There is a famous tale in which Eisai cures the then-ruling Shogun's hangover with the panacea brew.

Today, it is well known that green tea is high in Vitamin C, and has an abundance of catechins—tannin-like substances also found in wine and chocolate. Studies have suggested that catechins can combat a range of ailments, including diabetes, HIV, certain cancers and Alzheimer's disease. Fine-powdered green tea, like the maccha used in traditional tea ceremonies, is believed to be the healthiest since all the tea is ingested.

Research has proposed a connection between the remarkable longevity of the Japanese people and their high consumption of green tea. One study that followed 40,000 residents of northern Japan, from 1994 to 2005, found that those who drank five or more cups of green tea daily had a 16% lower risk of dying than those who consumed less than one cup.

Though green tea's health properties are valued in Japan, the tea-drinking customs of the archipelago have changed dramatically in recent years. "People in Japan now don't have time to drink slowly a cup of tea," laments Ryotaro Tsuen, whose family has run a teashop in the tea-growing city of Uji for 800 years. Japanese youth have become so accustomed to green tea sold in PET bottles at vending machines and convenience stores that they find the taste of freshly brewed tea odd. While green tea consumption in Japan has remained steady since

the 1960s, these days purchased tea is overwhelmingly bottled.

"The tea market is becoming polarized," suggests Tsuyoshi Sugimoto, sales and buying manager at Shohokuen, a tea manufacturer in Uji. "Cheaper tea is used for PET

bottle tea, and now tea leaf is used on only special occasions." Tea farmers are also under pressure from bottled-drink makers to lower prices, and it has become harder for growers to find domestic customers for their best tea leaves. On the other hand, foreign demand for quality teas is booming. Most of the country's premier-quality tea is exported, according to Tsuen.

Meanwhile, one company based near the city of Kamakura is hoping to create a new home and overseas markets for the very best teas. Founded last May, Royal Blue Tea produces vintage teas, including top-quality *gyokuro* green tea. The teas are sold in wine bottles, to be drunk cool from wine glasses, and are marketed to exclusive restaurants, hotels and department stores.

Royal Blue Tea uses the highest-quality

handpicked leaves in a labor-intensive process involving the leaves being steeped in cold water for up to six days. As a result, the teas have far-less caffeine than normal, according to Royal Blue Tea's Vice President Setsuo Sato—and a smoother, subtler palate. They are priced from several thousand yen to hundreds of thousands of yen. "We want people to enjoy our tea in the same way that they enjoy wine," adds the qualified tea sommelier. "We are attempting to spread a tea connoisseur culture." ☒

Opposite page: Shohokuen's Tsuyoshi Sugimoto at work in the Uji company's tasting room.

Above (L-R) Making maccha powdered tea in Shohokuen. Tea on sale in Tsuen's 800-year-old tea shop. Green tea is best brewed in a shallow, long-handled, ceramic pot.

HOW TO PREPARE GREEN TEA

- 1) Place the tea leaves in the teapot. 10g of ordinary tea should be enough for 2-3 people. Top-quality teas will need a little less.
- 2) Boil the water. Generally, green tea should be served cooler than black tea. Ordinary *sencha* can be made with water between 70-90°C. Sweeter teas, like fine *gyokuro*, should be brewed at around 50°C. Water straight from the kettle is about 90°C, so you can lower the temperature by pouring the water between cups (cooling by 5°C each time).
- 3) Leave the tea to brew, preferably in a ceramic pot. *Sencha* only needs about 30 seconds, because the water is so hot. *Gyokuro* may need up to 3 minutes.
- 4) Serve the tea. Partially fill each cup, in turn, until you have been through all the cups several times. That way, each will be of similar strength.
- 5) Relax and enjoy.

TEA CONNECTION

Tsuen Tea www.tsuentea.com/eng/index.htm

Shohokuen www.ujicha.com/e-index.html

Royal Blue Tea <http://royalbluetea.com/>