TEA STORIES: JAPAN

Japan's favourite cultivar

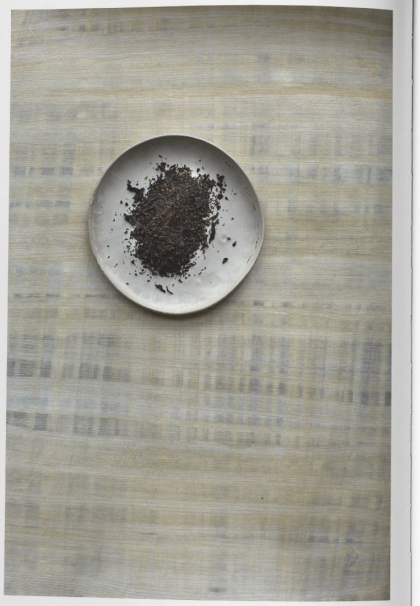
Japan predominantly makes green teas, but its tea industry has diversified in recent years. Considerable research, which I recently witnessed at the Kyoto Tea Institute, looks at new varieties and ways of growing. Experts develop and test cutting-edge technology in the laboratory, before applying their findings to plants in the fields. Varieties of cultivars are developed in the pursuit of changing taste, higher yields and other commercial needs. This expertise is used to develop certain types of tea to suit different terroirs, for example, finding a less astringent tea if grown in an extremely sunny unshaded environment. Researchers also want to develop teas with distinctive tastes so that they can stand out in the competitive wholesale market.

The most popular cultivar responsible for the typical flavours found in Japanese green tea is *Yabukita*. This cultivar was developed in Shizuoka at the beginning of the 20th century and formally registered in 1954. It now covers 75% of all tea plantations in Japan. *Yabukita* consistently produces a good yield, is resistant to cold weather and can be cultivated in different kinds of soil and climate. It has a distinctive long straight vivid green leaf that produces a well-balanced taste with a distinctive *umami* flavour and strong aroma when made into *sencha*.

There are many other cultivars with nuanced differences. *Yutakamidori* covers the second largest area. Bred in Shizuoka, it is now grown in Kagoshima and is usually processed into *fukamushi sencha* with a root crop sweetness. *Saxmidori* is similar to *Yabukita* but is less bitter and astringent. Even in the strong sunlight of Kagoshima it retains its sweetness.

Benifuki is originally a black tea cultivar but it can be processed as a green tea with a prominent astringency. It also has rare catechins, natural antioxidants, that are thought to be helpful fighting seasonal allergies. *Kenayamidori* is known for its milky flavour. *Kaohun* has fruity notes and a floral aroma. *Sofu* also has a flowery aroma and unique muscated notes. There is a subtle beauty with *Okuhikari*, which is a little stronger than *Yabukita*. *Yamakai* is delicious with rare melon notes that increase when infused with iced water. The leaves of *Sayamakaori* are unique in that they grow evenly and have a forest-like aroma. *Asatsuyu* has prominent 'green' vegetal notes. The flavour of spring is tasted in *Shizu-7132*, named without being formally registered, with its aroma of *sakura* – cherry blossom. And *Tsuyuhikari* is a cross between *Asatsuyu* and *Shizu-7132* with a balance between their *sakura* and vegetal notes.

Most of these named cultivars have been registered in the Japanese tea cultivar registration system, which was created in 1953. However, many cultivars exist that are not officially recognized and listed. Each tea produced from one of these varieties has its own distinctive qualities.



Going organic

How do you make responsible teas? What is best for all and not just one?

A tea farmer's choice of fertiliser affects everything – the teas, the environment and ultimately the customer.

Compost alone only has half the required nitrogen – you would have to bury the plants deep in compost to get the relatively small yields to support the ever-growing demand for tea with thin profit margins! Other natural fertilisers take time to break down for the plant to be absorbed.

It is a weighty decision that a farmer makes – whether or not to include the use of chemical fertilisers.

I choose the teas I sell predominately on taste. The story that goes into the making of a tea is present in the taste. I don't need an organic certificate when I buy tea from a small farm, like that of the Fujiwaras in Shizuoka, where the tea is cared for and nurtured in such a personal way; I consider their tea to be a "natural tea".

Next, tea leaves are sorted using large different sized mesh screens to separate various tea particles: the tea leaves, stems and dust. Traditionally this was, and occasionally still is, done by hand.

We watched this graceful artisanal process at The Nagatani Factory, near the Chosomyu Shrine in Uji. The Nagatanis have worked in tea for seven generations. We met Kobayashi san, who sorts the leaves by hand, described by Mr Takeda as "a very good technician". He wears a work shirt, white peaked cap and a quaintly tied floral scarf around his head, so we know him as the "Headscarf Man". The pristine floor is used for blending. To make *gyokuro*, he employs a wafting technique with a bamboo basket that refines the tea leaves. With a bamboo sieve, he then separates the light tea powder from the heavier leaves and a deep green tea powder drifts down making large sprinkled circles on the shiny clean floor. This fine dust-like powder is used for *konacha* tea.

Teaware

Many of my customers who are new to Japanese tea have questions about how best to prepare it. How to bring out the variations in taste? Which tea tools to choose? How to store the tea? And my favourite – what is the best teaware?

On my Japanese tea journey, I learned early on that both design and function are very important when choosing teaware. Subtle details also play their part. It's the way you pour the last drop of tea into your cup while easily holding the lid in place with one hand. Wares retain heat from different kilns depending on the specific clay of the area and the aesthetic characteristics of each piece – the maker, material, capacity and utility.

I find profound enjoyment in the process of choosing teaware for the shop. In a way, it reflects the deepest realms of my individuality. I often choose beauty over function, but with a simplicity of form. I love teaware that does not attempt to be stylish. I don't live by rules and I choose to be brave – both in life and in tea. My choices of teaware may not make sense initially, but those pieces form the mood of the collection. I look for complete finesse in each piece from clear glass to crisp porcelain. Each piece has a beauty of its own and as part of a group. I don't even mind if they don't sell as it means I get to keep them.

For use at home I choose teaware to make my teatime special. I like to explore how the bowl or teapot feels to hold and how the colour of the liquid develops within. I realise I have become more minimalist in my choices, in most aspects of my life, and I therefore need fewer tools. I have simplified my rituals because of familiarity with these daily objects. Over time I have gone through so many tea preparation methods and now have arrived at perfect tea with just two tools: my constant companions are a *houhin* teapot and a cup.

At the start of a journey into tea, the focus is the process. Once the process is ingrained in memory, it is possible to be open to other realms of pottery. Your choice of teaware can represent you in a particular way and suit your own process of making teas. You can get to know favourite makers and learn their stories. The shift is exciting as you create your own tea experience – whether just for you or for others.

I start the day with *sencha* followed by *matcha*. I drink tea after lunch – black, green or herbal. I always drink a herbal tea with a little edible treat before bed as my favourite moment of tranquillity.

Teapot

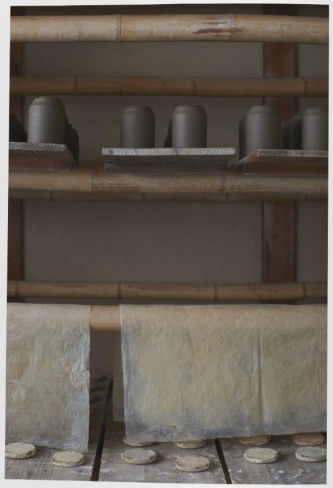
Follow your instinct in your choice of teapot rather than its reputation. In time, a relationship develops as your teapot becomes a daily companion. When choosing a teapot for brewing Japanese tea, simply consider matching the teapot to the tea. Teapots made from delicate materials, like porcelain and glass, trap less heat which make them more suitable for delicate teas and for higher grade green teas. Teapots made from earthenware materials retain heat better but will absorb most of the aroma, bitterness and astringency. These types of teapots are more suitable for stronger and less aromatic teas, such as black tea and *byo bancha*.

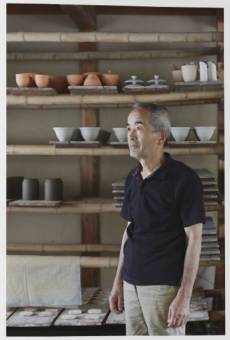
For those reasons, some people have several types of tea teapots, one for each kind of tea. They consider the temperature at which it is fired, the region in which it is produced and the type of kiln, whether they are glazed and made of porous or non-porous material. I think the simplest option is to have two teapots, one for aroma-oriented teas and one for taste-oriented teas.

These are traditional Japanese teapots most suited for brewing Japanese teas:

Kyusu

Kyusu means "teapot" but is also known as a side-handled pot, with the spout at a near-90-degree angle from the handle. It is the most frequently used Japanese teapot. It is simple in design and suitable for making *sencha*. It can have an built-in filter for teas with fine particles such as deep-steamed *fukamushi sencha* or *kamacha*.





Kilns

Bizen, Echizen, Seto, Shigaraki, Tanba and Tokoname make up the Six Ancient Kilns of Japan. They have produced wares used in tea ceremonies from medieval times to today. Bizen, in Okayama Prefecture west of Kyoto, and Shigaraki, in Shiga Prefecture east of Kyoto, are the two whose wares I am most familiar with.

The wares from these two kilns often had fly-ash glazing, which is created by the wood-burning kilns. Fly ash settles on the objects within the kiln, melts and creates a natural ash glaze that cannot be achieved with any other type of firing.

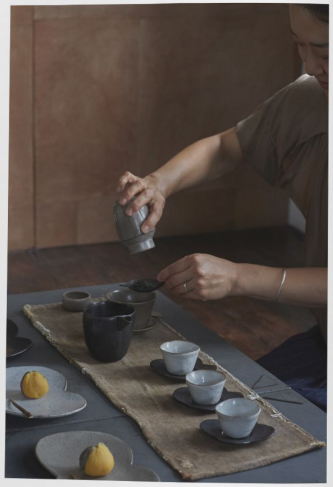
Gyokuro
(two ways)

- Tea leaves: 10g/Water 100ml
- Brewing temperature: 60°C
- Brewing time: 120 seconds
- Dry leaves: shiny, emerald green, uniform spindles
- Liquor: pale green
- Aromas: intense spinach and seaweed
- Body: medium to fuller bodied with slight cloudiness
- Flavours: lush green, fresh steamed spinach; *umami* mouth-filling sensation with rich sweetness that evolves and holds steady as you swirl it in your mouth

Gyokuro is a study of subtlety. It is a type of tea as well as an adjective. It has come to describe teas with *umami*, a mouth-filling sensation, which is caused by shade growing. The tea leaves of *sencha* and *gyokuro* resemble each other slightly, both in appearance and taste, yet shade-grown *gyokuro* accounts for subtly lusher, darker, more mouth-coating tea, partly due to the different method of preparation.

You will need double the amount of tea leaves. To prevent the caffeine and astringency from taking over the desired sweetness and *umami*, make sure you cool down the water by pouring it from vessel to vessel a few times before pouring it onto the tea leaves and letting it brew for two minutes. The result is a special tea that the Japanese particularly prize for its consistent vegetal flavour with a gentle, soothing sweetness and an intense sensation of richness and savouriness. Due to its almost overwhelming richness, it is best enjoyed in small cups.

Gyokuro also makes an excellent cold brew. Put 20g of tea leaves and pour 750ml of room temperature soft water in a clear glass vessel. Let it sit for two hours and mix thoroughly a few times during brewing to fully extract the flavour. When the tea leaves have fully opened and sunk to the bottom of the vessel, add ice to adjust the flavour and drink within 24 hours.



We chose to make a refreshing cold tea to drink. One method of chilled tea preparation is called *kouridashi* style – which is less known, but a wonderful way to distil the essence of tea. It is also known as ice-brewing – you pack ice on top of tea leaves in a jug and let it melt slowly, then once melted, stir, and pour into glasses. This style captures the sweetness of the tea and is perfect for fine teas like *gyokuro* and *shincha*. We chose to drink chilled *yuzu hoshicha*, which suits cold-brewing rather than *kouridashi* style and is very easy to make. It is mild with a citrusy note that compliments the other dishes we prepared.

We made an *ochazuke*. It is a simple, traditional Japanese dish that is enjoyed usually at the end of the meal since it is easy to digest if you still have some rice left over in your rice bowl. It is a little like a tea soup. The leftover cooked rice is topped with savoury condiments to suit your taste along with something pickled – vegetables or fish – and then a tea, like *hoshicha*, *sencha* or *hojicha*, is poured gently around the ingredients. We used a smoked *hojicha* from Kaneroku Matsumoto Tea Garden in Shizuoka, where they grow their teas with the practice of *chagusaiba*. I have included the addition of salted pickled cherry blossom, which I had brought back from our trip and carefully stored for many months.

I wanted to create something that is recognisably an English tea-time snack – a finger sandwich. The history of the sandwich has an impressive pedigree: the term "sandwich" was named after John Montague, the 4th Earl of Sandwich, who, in 1762, apparently had the idea of putting a filling between two slices of bread. The quintessentially English custom of afternoon tea is attributed to Anna, the 7th Duchess of Bedford, in the 1840s. She wanted to stave off mid-afternoon hunger pangs and asked that a tray of tea, bread and butter, and cake be brought to her room during the late afternoon. This pause for afternoon tea, where the drinking of tea, eating delicate cucumber sandwiches, scones with cream and jam, and small cakes and pastries developed in the Victorian times into a fashionable social event. But for this book I was looking for something different to the traditional bread, butter and cucumber sandwiches, so we incorporated *matcha* powder and young *shincha* leaves into the recipe. This is also a tribute to our farewell snack in Bizen, made by Chieko Hitoshi.

The *hojicha* used in the ice cream is from the organic Nakai factory we visited in Kyoto. Kaori explains: "I decided to make *hojicha* ice cream to recreate a memory of the Kyoto where I grew up. There was a sweets café called Kyo Hayashiya near my art college that served *hojicha* ice cream. I think it was their invention. It was rare in those days, but it has become popular now, but still not as common as green *matcha* ice cream."

"I am relatively new to *nagashi* making. It started two years ago when I had designed and created a new tea set and had an occasion of throwing a tea ceremony. It was not a conventional tea ceremony, not pure Japanese style, but it was our interpretation. I needed a sweet to go with the tea and made my first *nagashi*, which is usually not something you make at home. My choice here of lentil and sesame drops have a contemporary twist on traditional *nagashi* as lentils are not a traditional ingredient. I wanted to make it with ingredients that would be easy to buy in London. I love the colours, which work so well with the tea set we chose. We drank it with a Uji *shincha* tea that had just arrived from Mr Takada."

Kaori describes her role: "I helped Aussa adjust and assemble the recipes. We introduced more aspects of tea into the recipes and tried to break the concept of how tea is used traditionally in Japan – it has been like an adventure of flavours."

With Kaori's "Japaneseness", suggestions and skilful palate, the taste of the recipes were completely in tune with each other. I will remember this experience as a fine example of Japanese taste – not too sweet or too salty – a perfect delicateness.

Lightly Pickled Summer Vegetable *Ochazuke*

2 servings:

- 160g steamed Japanese rice

For toppings:

- Cooked brown shrimp
- Shelled sweet peas
- Spring onion (white parts only)
- Young courgette or asparagus
- 4 pieces salted cherry blossoms
  (substitute with *umeboshi* plum if not available)
- Roasted *soba* kernels

For tea:

- Smoked *hojicha* tea from Kaneroku Matsumoto
  (substitute with *kyobancha* or *hojicha* if not available)

Cook Japanese short grain rice, set aside to cool. Form a small ball of rice by placing a handful of the rice into cling film or muslin cloth to mould into balls.

Blanch the shelled peas in hot salted water for 5 minutes, drain and set aside.

To make a pickling liquor combine 50ml white wine vinegar and water in equal amounts, add a pinch of salt and half teaspoon of sugar, adjust amounts to desired taste. Cut the courgette and spring onion into fine shavings and submerge in the pickling liquor for 5 minutes.

For the tea, place 1 heaped tablespoon of smoked *hojicha* tea leaves in 150ml of boiling water in a teapot and brew for up to 1 minute.

To serve: place the rice balls in a serving bowl, arrange the toppings of brown shrimp, pickled courgette/asparagus and spring onions, and pickled cherry blossoms over the rice. Sprinkle with toasted soba kernels and then pour the hot brewed tea around the ingredients until all is half submerged in tea.

Other common toppings include Japanese pickles (collectively known as *tsukemono*), *umeboshi*, *nori* (seaweed), *furikake* (seasoning), sesame seeds, *tarako* and *mentaiko* (salted and marinated pollock roe), salted salmon, *shiokara* (pickled seafood), scallions, and *wasabi*.

You could also use *matcha* or *sencha* powder to sprinkle over the toppings and pour boiled water or *dashi* stock instead of brewed tea.

A few days later, we visited a garden behind a very small temple in the centre of Kyoto where we discovered a tea house, reached by a path of stepping-stones through clouds of mosquitoes. Here, two Westerners, Tyas Sōsen from Belgium and Stephen Sōshun, from England, host tea ceremonies, or as they call it, "a tea occasion".

Tyas and Stephen are both certified as tea masters in the Way of Tea taught by the Enshū school, the warrior style. Tyas is the first Belgian Qualified Instructor, and Stephen is the first Westerner to become Assistant Grand Master of the Enshū school.

They have been given Zen names by the Grand Master of their tradition. Stephen is tall, with elegant white hair, a Walter Raleigh beard and commanding presence. Tyas emanates tranquillity; he is younger, with a shaven head and wore a dark grey silk kimono that matched the colour of his eyes.

To enter the tea house, we had to crawl through a small opening, so small that had we been a Samurai of the warrior class it would have been necessary to remove our long swords.

We sat on special woven stools, slightly raised for Westerners, and removed jewellery so as not to damage the teaware as well as to relinquish "public persona".

Tyas was the host. He executed the tea preparation. Stephen's role was to talk us through what was happening and draw our attention to details in the tea house and etiquette. It was a perfect opportunity, without a language barrier, for us to learn about some of the history and rituals and ask questions.

Stephen explained that the tea occasion is not a performance; it is a ritual, a spiritual activity, and everyone present has their own role. He calls it "an assembly of energy fields". It is transforming an ordinary act of hospitality into a meditative ritual.

The way of Takada-san

Our research trip for this book reminded me of my initial visits with Mr Takada when there were daily surprises in the itinerary. Georgia, Little, Rachelle and I would get into Mr Takada's people-mover punctually, ready for the day, with our schedule in hand and…out the window it went. We were going off-piste. Mr Takada changed our plans overnight or over lunch. After a couple of days of this, we eased into his rhythm and accepted our fate in his hands – it created an additional, unexpected and wonderful dimension to our journey. We met Mr Takada's friends, community and contacts who welcomed us with open arms because we were with him. I call it "The Way of Takada-san".

The essence of The Way of Takada-san is his wish to make people happy. And the embodiment of that is Mr Takada's own Happy Tea Ceremony, which he promised to perform for us. The date for the ceremony kept changing because Mr Takada needed the moment to 'feel right' – to be rested and relaxed after our epic travels. But on his chosen day, his clothes and tea tools were ready for us.

Mr Takada sat cross-legged on the floor and bowed. He placed a small amount of tea leaves into his *houhin* teapot and, in a circular motion, added some chilled water. He left it to brew for three minutes and then poured a few drops equally into each of the tiny cups in front of him. He poured from a height, drop by drop. The cup to get the last drop was the lucky one. The Happy Tea Ceremony was performed in absolute silence with his inimitable serene grace.

I remember hearing the history of this tea ceremony when Mr Takada had been employed by a kimono company that hosted kimono shows to sell their designs. Mr Takada's role was to perform a tea ceremony to entertain their clients and attract more people, as well as regulating the flow of customers – while some tried on kimonos others were distracted by his ceremony. He would sit at the tea table and welcome people, from 10am to 6pm, performing his own original ceremony to groups of six or seven guests, 15 times a day.

"I created this ceremony. Freestyle. I call it Happy Tea because it makes people happy after drinking the tea. And it makes them want to buy kimono because there's lots of caffeine in the high-quality *gyokuro* I serve. Caffeine makes them excited and they rush to buy the kimono!

The most important point in my ceremony is that it can stop any time. It all depends on the guest's face. I have to make them happy. If they are irritated or have no interest, both sides are wasting their time. I can judge if 'she isn't enjoying' so in this case I will make just a short ceremony.

The kimono show is sometimes very calm and sometimes very crowded, so the salesmen need to control how many guests are inside – if too many, they may miss a customer so they say, 'Please Takada-san, keep the next guest on your table.' Then they will send me a gesture behind the guest to 'make it longer or short.' Traffic control. This is very good for their sales promotion.

I now have two young female students who help me with my demonstrations. They are often asked by the older lady guests, 'Who is your teacher? Where did you learn this ceremony? You didn't belong to the formal tea ceremony school?' It is hard work for my students to make the client happy. I say to them, 'Don't fight with the guest, just listen to the question. You don't need to give the correct answer, just listen.'"