

Matcha

A Short History from the Song Dynasty to Social Media

by Rebecca Corbett

Abstract

Matcha—a variety of green tea that is made by grinding tea leaves into powder—has its origins in ancient China, before it spread to Japan and became a symbol of national identity, particularly through its use in *chanoyu* (Japanese tea ceremony). In the twentieth century, knowledge of matcha spread to the West but its reception was largely unfavorable until a social media driven matcha boom in the last decade. This article traces these developments, highlighting moments of economic and cultural exchange within East Asia, as well as Western encounters with Japanese culture.

Keywords

Matcha, green tea, *chanoyu*, global commodity, China, Japan.

Rebecca Corbett is Associate University Librarian for Japanese Studies and Associate Professor (Teaching) of History at the University of Southern California. She received a PhD from the University of Sydney (2009) and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University (2013–2015). Her book [*Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan*](#)

(University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) analyses privately circulated and commercially published texts to show how *chanoyu* practice for women was understood, articulated, and promoted from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries. Her current research explores the history of Western engagement with *chanoyu* and matcha in the Meiji period (1868–1912). She has been a student of the Urasenke school of *chanoyu* since 1999.



Introduction

In March 2026 during the Baseball World Classic, videos of Japan's national team (nicknamed Samurai Japan) celebrating with a matcha whisking gesture went viral.¹ This sports-tea crossover spoke to the global moment: a matcha boom over the last decade which exploded in 2025. Major cafe chains like Starbucks and independent cafes have matcha on the menu, and dedicated matcha cafes exist not just in Japan but across the Western world in cities like Melbourne, San Francisco, and Stockholm. Many of you, no doubt, have tried a matcha latte, or seen Instagram and TikTok videos about the popular green beverage. While matcha is most closely associated with Japanese culture and its role in *chanoyu* (or Japanese tea ceremony), it did not originate in Japan. Matcha's origins in ancient China and its spread beyond Asia in the twenty-first century mean that we should think about it as a global commodity. At the same time, matcha remains closely associated with Japanese national identity, hence Samurai Japan adopting matcha whisking as their team gesture.

Matcha History

Matcha production and consumption dates back hundreds of years but tea drinking has its origins in China around 4000 years ago. By the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), tea was widely drunk, with compressed tea bricks or cakes ground and infused into hot water.² Then in the Song Dynasty (960–1279) powdered tea, made from grinding up tea cakes, was whisked into a froth with a bamboo whisk.³

The tea plant was first imported to Japan from China around 750, probably by Buddhist monks. Historian William Farris has shown that we cannot be more specific than this and should be wary of mytho-historical stories directly linking the origins of tea in Japan to the Buddhist monks Saichō (767–822) and Kūkai (774–835), as is commonly stated.⁴

From the earliest date of tea coming into Japan of around 750 to around 1300 there was a nascent tea industry in Japan, and tea was drunk by the elite—that is to say the Buddhist monastic and imperial court communities—in Kyoto and surrounding areas. It would have been more of a brown liquid and quite bitter



Figure 1. *Chausu*: A modern stone grinder with the leaves (*tencha*) on top and some ground tea (matcha) at the base. Image credit: Sarah Stewart.



Figure 2. *Chasen*. A tea whisk made from a single piece of bamboo, with tines split using a small knife.
Image credit: Rebecca Corbett.

compared to what we are used to, and it was made with tea leaves that had been pressed into a brick, which were then shaved off and mixed with hot water.⁵ It was not matcha.

It is commonly said that the Buddhist monk Yōsai (Eisai, 1141–1215) brought matcha to Japan from China, but this is similar to the mytho-history around Saichō and Kūkai's roles in the origins of tea in Japan. Yōsai certainly would have drunk tea in some form as a Buddhist monk, and we know he advised the shogun, Minamoto no Sanetomo (1192–1219; r. 1203–1219), to drink tea to cure his stomach ailment. He also wrote about the health benefits of drinking tea in *Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life* (*Kissa yōjōki*).⁶ Whether the type of tea Yōsai promoted was matcha, however, is questionable. While something similar to what we now know as matcha was being drunk in China during the eleventh century, we cannot be sure that Yōsai was familiar with this type of tea. It is far more likely that what he drank and promoted was the brown, bitter liquid that had been drunk for a few hundred years in Japan already.⁷

During the period from 1300–1600, the tea industry in Japan grew and tea became available to more consumers across the Japanese archipelago. This was the period in which the stone grinder (*chausu*, see figure 1), along with bamboo whisks (*chasen*, see figure 2), was introduced to Japan from China and matcha was developed. The importance of the stone grinder for turning tea leaves (*tencha*) into ground powder (matcha), which was brought from China in around 1250, cannot be overstated: it resulted in a finely milled, bright green and sweeter-tasting tea. The bamboo whisk, brought from China around the same time, is also important for creating a light and frothy beverage.

As matcha consumption grew in Japan, tea drinking became more of a social affair, drunk for enjoyment as well as the health benefits that tea had already been associated with since its introduction in the eighth century. In the 1500s, procedures for preparing matcha using a variety of utensils began to be codified as the practice of chanoyu developed.⁸ By contrast, in China, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398, r. 1368–1398) declared that only loose-leaf tea was acceptable as tribute, essentially banning powdered tea in 1391. Thus, in essence, matcha disappeared from the Asian continent following this declaration, and Japan was the only place where the practice of consuming matcha continued. The disappearance of matcha in China and its then adoption in Japan, eventually becoming a symbol of Japanese national identity, are an excellent example of how political and economic decisions can have far-reaching cultural consequences.



Figure 3. *Koicha*: Matcha of a high grade has been kneaded into a small amount of hot water to create a viscous beverage that is dark green. Image credit: Ruth Lionberger.

Matcha in Chanoyu

Matcha was consumed in Japan over the next centuries largely through its use in chanoyu from the late 1500s, but it was also available at roadside cafes throughout Japan as part of an increasingly commercial culture around tea. The term chanoyu literally means “hot water for tea.” This simple name refers to a practice that has cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual elements taught by bodily transmission from teacher to student. Matcha is the only kind of tea prepared and consumed in chanoyu.⁹ Matcha is prepared in chanoyu in two ways: thick tea (*koicha*, see figure 3), a viscous preparation in which a lot of matcha is mixed with a very small amount of hot water, and each guest will just take a few sips before passing the bowl along to the next guest; and thin tea (*usucha*, see figure 4), a light, frothy beverage made from whisking a small amount of matcha into hot water and served one bowl per guest. In chanoyu contexts matcha is only ever prepared by being whisked into hot water; no other flavorings, sweeteners, or ingredients are added.

Thin tea is what many people are familiar with as it is almost always the preparation served in cafe contexts and to guests at chanoyu demonstrations. Serving thick tea is generally reserved for practitioners of chanoyu as it is an acquired taste due to the higher concentration, and the guest etiquette for thick tea is more complicated.

For practitioners of chanoyu invited to a full tea gathering (*chaji*), both thick and thin tea are served, each prepared with a distinct tea making procedure (*temae*) using different utensils. A meal (*kaiseki*) and several rounds of sake are also served, along with sweets, with different varieties accompanying the thick and thin tea.¹⁰

Matcha Production

Matcha comes from the same plant as other types of tea, *Camellia sinensis*, and as with all green teas, the leaves are heated to prevent oxidation. In matcha production the leaves, called *tencha* at this stage in the production process, are heated by being steamed, then crushed and dried. The stems and veins are removed before the dried leaves are ground to a powder. The key difference from other forms of tea is that this tea powder is whisked into hot water, rather than leaves being steeped and then removed as in other types of tea preparation. That is to say, whether you take a tea bag out of a cup, or you pour from a teapot filled with tea leaves through a strainer and into a cup, in all other types of tea drinking you are drinking water infused with tea but not ingesting the leaf directly.



Figure 4. *Usucha*: A bowl of thin tea, which is light green and frothy, in the style of the Urasenke school of tea (other schools may not create so much froth).
Image credit: Bruce Hamana.



Figure 5. Matcha: Ground green tea leaves.
Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Matcha production, both historically and today, is cyclical. Tea plants being grown for matcha production are shaded for several weeks before harvest, which happens in the spring. The process of blocking sunlight from reaching the plant helps to lock in the deep green color and nutrients as well as increase compounds like theanine and caffeine.¹¹

The freshest, youngest leaves of the plant are picked by hand. After the first harvest, there will typically be a second or even third harvest. Then, different blends are created by mixing leaves from different crops or harvests. As a standard rule, blends made from first harvest tea leaves are going to be rated as higher grade



Figure 6. The tea-leaf storage jar (*chatsubo*) named [Chigusa](#). Image credit: National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F2016.20.1.

matcha, cost more, and should have a less bitter taste than blends made by mixing or entirely using second or third harvest leaves. Blends are given a name, often something poetic such as “spring breeze” (*aoarashi*), and they each have different flavor profiles. One major Japanese matcha producing company, Marukyu Koyamaen, currently has over a dozen blends listed in the category “principal matcha,” an additional five “limited edition” matcha, and matcha that are categorized as being favored by one tea school or another—or one temple or another.¹² Some matcha is designated as suitable for preparing as thick tea; other matcha is designated as suitable for making thin tea. Since thick tea is so concentrated, the highest grades of matcha are used. There are also blends that are designated as suitable for both thick and thin tea.

Tencha that was harvested in spring will be ready to drink as matcha in autumn. While today, matcha is refrigerated in factory sealed tins or foil packages of varying sizes for storage and transportation, prior to industrialization it was typically stored and transported in large ceramic jars called *chatsubo* (tea-leaf storage jars; see figure 6). Originally these jars, made in China, were used to transport goods on ships to Japan. In Japan, rather than being utilitarian storage objects, they became repurposed as prized aesthetic objects that were specifically used to store tea leaves. The jar *Chigusa*, now in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, is an example of how such objects were given proper names and highly valued by chanoyu practitioners.¹³

Each year, the new crop of tencha was placed inside the jars which were then transported from tea plantations to customers all over the Japanese archipelago.¹⁴ In the autumn, tea practitioners would open the jar of fresh tea leaves during what are known as “mouth-cutting” (*kuchi-kiri*) tea gatherings. The jar would be “dressed” with a fabric mouth cover and decorative cords, as *Chigusa* is in figure 7, and placed in the alcove (*tokonoma*) of the tearoom before being opened or “cut”.¹⁵ During the tea gathering, the host used a stone grinder to produce freshly milled matcha for their guests. While these tea-leaf storage jars are no longer regularly used to house and transport tencha, many chanoyu practitioners still maintain the practice of hosting “mouth-cutting” tea gatherings in autumn even if the tea they are serving is not ground on the spot from tencha inside the *chatsubo* but new season matcha from a factory sealed tin.



Figure 7. Chigusa dressed: The tea-leaf storage jar (*chatsubo*) named Chigusa is [dressed for display](#) with a fabric mouth covering and blue decorative cords. Image credit: National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F2016.20.1.

Matcha and Health

The health benefits of matcha have long been recognized in China and Japan, and modern scientific research has confirmed that matcha is very high in antioxidants and ECGCs (Epigallocatechin gallate), while caffeine absorption is slower than from coffee, giving a more sustained effect. Matcha is also rich in theanine, a proven muscle relaxant that has a calming effect which improves mental focus. The theanine offsets or complements the stimulating effects of caffeine.¹⁶ Drinking matcha may therefore make someone feel both stimulated and calm at the same time, a quality that many people appreciate. This is one reason why historically drinking matcha was popular among Buddhist monks who had to stay awake during long hours of meditation. It may also be why today matcha has become such a popular alternative to coffee.

Western Encounters

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when trade and travel between Japan and the West began in earnest, matcha was a different enough drink for Western palates that many travelers to Japan, or those who got to try it at places like World's Fairs in America and Europe, described it in some detail and often unfavorably.¹⁷ Wealthy Canadian tourist Katharine Schuyler Baxter (1845–?) wrote in her 1895 book about travelling in Japan that “the beverage is made of powdered leaves, is greenish in color, thick like pea-soup, fragrant, and not very palatable. We much preferred the ordinary infusion.”¹⁸ Baxter is contrasting matcha with steeped green leaf tea, sencha, which was popular in the U.S. at the time.¹⁹ The Countess Anna de Montaigu, a journalist, writing for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* newspaper about a tea gathering she attended at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, stated, “As for the tea used in the ceremony, it is unknown to Americans.”²⁰ She said, “Drunk without sugar or cream this expensive tea, although of exquisite flavor to the connoisseur, is not pleasant to the palate of the uninitiated.”²¹



Figure 8. "The Celebrated Japanese "Tea Ceremony" at the St. Louis World's Fair, *St Louis Globe Democrat* (21 Aug, 1904).
Image credit: St. Louis Public Library.

Montaigu's comments are interesting to look back on given that matcha's explosion in popularity around the Western world in the last decade is largely through its use in mixed drinks that have sweeteners and cream or milks added to the matcha.

Recent Trends

By 2025, global matcha consumption had grown so much that the media began reporting on the matcha shortages that have led producers in Japan to increase prices and limit supply.²²

And in May, 2026, the International Matcha Association and thirty-eight Japanese tea companies issued an Emergency Joint Statement on the Integrity and Sustainable Development of the Global Matcha Market.²³ Many people see the introduction of matcha to the menu at Starbucks in 2019 as a pivotal moment in its global rise. Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, have certainly fueled this trend with hashtags like #matcha and #matchalover revealing reels and posts from the absurd, like a 2026 advertisement from Heinz UK for "matcha mayo: a bold new take on your favorite sauce, inspired by the flavour everyone's obsessed with right now" that turned out to be an April Fool's joke, to more serious posts from producers of matcha in Japan or the global community of chanoyu practitioners debunking common myths like "ceremonial grade."²⁴ According to a CNN report, by September 2025 there were 700,000 Tik Toks about matcha.²⁵

In recent years it has become common for people to speak of "ceremonial grade matcha" and "culinary grade matcha" as two distinct categories. The term "ceremonial" supposedly designates that the matcha is suitable for drinking, specifically in a Japanese tea ceremony, as opposed to "culinary" matcha that is suitable for cooking with. Yet, no such terms exist in the history of Japanese matcha production or chanoyu and "ceremonial grade" is in fact a relatively recent made-up marketing term, albeit one that has caught on in Japan as well as in the West. There is currently no global body that oversees the labeling of grades of matcha, nor is it regulated in the United States by the Food and Drug Administration or similar bodies in other countries. Essentially, this means that quality differs widely and labels such as "ceremonial grade"

can be applied by anyone to anything. Scientific research comparing the composition and properties of ceremonial versus culinary matcha has shown that “culinary-grade products are an economical choice for consumers wanting to prepare matcha tea beverages with the highest levels of phenolic compounds, flavonoids, and catechins.”²⁶ Most practitioners of chanoyu are dismissive of the designation “ceremonial”, instead relying on their own knowledge of blends and flavor profiles developed from years of making and drinking matcha.

Another recent trend is to label any powder derived from a plant as matcha. For example, butterfly pea powder is being marketed and sold as “blue matcha.” Ground tea leaves from a variety of Japanese roasted green tea called *hōjicha* are being marketed and sold as “ceremonial hojicha powder” with the explanation that *hōjicha* is “roasted matcha.” This trend, often combined with the “ceremonial” trend as in the *hōjicha* example, bespeaks the rise of matcha as a global commodity with name recognition for the product despite the limited understanding of what it is. True matcha is made from *tencha* and is therefore a variety of green tea, not roasted green tea or butterfly pea tea (which is in fact not a tea but a tisane, or herbal infusion). The fact that misinformation and misuse of terminology is now so widespread speaks to the surge in interest in matcha and resulting business opportunities.

Conclusion

A Japanese beverage that is now ubiquitous around the world and has its origins in ancient China. Matcha truly is a global commodity. From the importation of the tea plant itself from China to Japan around 750, the importation from China to Japan of the stone grinder and bamboo whisk essential to matcha production and preparation in around 1250, to the use of utilitarian Chinese ceramic storage jars as tea-leaf storage jars, which became prized possessions in Japan that were assigned personal names and now exist as highly valued museum objects, we can see economic and cultural exchange across East Asia through tracing the history of matcha.

We can also see the history of the West’s interaction with and adoption of Asian foods and commodities, from the late-nineteenth century need to contextualize matcha in global tea culture by explaining its difference from the more commonly known loose leaf teas, to twenty-first-century social media cooption, some might say appropriation, of “traditional” Japanese aesthetics associated with chanoyu, to generate likes of viral content that is far removed from chanoyu’s values of harmony, respect, purity and tranquility. We can even see the mishmashing of ingredients from different Asian cultures into one super drink with the recent popularity of ube matcha lattes combining the purple Filipino ube (purple yam) with green Japanese matcha. In the case of both ube and matcha, skyrocketing global demand, particularly driven by social media and Western consumerism, has put pressure on local industries in the Philippines and Japan.²⁷

For Japan—a country which relies heavily on its “Gross National Cool” to fuel its economy and international image²⁸—the shift from matcha as a niche product enjoyed mostly by chanoyu practitioners or in specialty cafes in places associated with tea culture like Uji, to its status as global superfood trend helps increase the national cool, but comes with a price as farmers struggle to keep up with demand and matcha production, once exclusive to Japan, begins to move offshore. For China, from where matcha originated, the global boom has given it the opportunity to proclaim itself as the originator of matcha and develop a matcha industry.

Notes

I would like to thank the Japan Foundation for a research fellowship that informed parts of this article and extend my gratitude to Michelle Liu Carriger and Joseph Sorensen for feedback on an early draft.

¹ Daisuke Makino, “Samurai Japan hits a winner with tea whisk gesture at WBC,” *Mainichi Japan*, March 10, 2026. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20260309/p2a/00m/0sp/008000c>.

² See James Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015: 21–41. Marc Jason Gilbert, "Chinese Tea in World History", *Education About Asia*, 13:2 (Fall 2008): Asia in World History: 1750–1914.

³ James Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015: 117–144.

⁴ On the importation of tea from China to Japan and the roles of Saichō and Kūkai, see William Wayne Farris, *A Bowl for a Coin: A Commodity History of Japanese Tea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 9–14.

⁵ Farris, *A Bowl for a Coin*, 7–33.

⁶ An English translation of *Drink Tea and Prolong Your Life* is available in James Benn, *Tea in China: A Religious and Cultural History*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2015: 145–171.

⁷ Farris, *A Bowl for a Coin*, 21–27.

⁸ See Carriger, Michelle Liu, and Rebecca Corbett. "Chanoyu: An Introduction." *Teaching Tea: Culture, History, Practice, Art on Japan Past & Present*. 2025. <https://japanpastandpresent.org/en/projects/teaching-tea-culture-history-practice-art/introduction/chanoyu-an-introduction>.

⁹ See Carriger, Michelle Liu, and Rebecca Corbett. "Chanoyu: An Introduction." *Teaching Tea: Culture, History, Practice, Art on Japan Past & Present*. 2025. <https://japanpastandpresent.org/en/projects/teaching-tea-culture-history-practice-art/introduction/chanoyu-an-introduction>.

¹⁰ See Rath, Eric C. "The Tea Ceremony as a Culinary Experience: Matcha, Sweets, and Kaiseki." *Teaching Tea: Culture, History, practice, Art on Japan Past & Present*. 2025. <https://japanpastandpresent.org/en/projects/teaching-tea-culture-history-practice-art/resources/the-tea-ceremony-as-a-culinary-experience-matcha-sweets-and-kaiseki>.

¹¹ Kika, Joanna, Karolina Jakubczyk, Alicja Ligenza, Dominika Maciejewska-Markiewicz, Kinga Szymczykowska, and Katarzyna Janda-Milczarek. "Matcha Green Tea: Chemical Composition, Phenolic Acids, Caffeine and Fatty Acid Profile." *Foods* (BASEL) 13, no. 8 (April 2024): 1167.

¹² Marukyu Koyamaen International Online Shop, accessed December 2, 2025, <https://www.marukyu-koyamaen.co.jp/english/shop/products/catalog/matcha>.

¹³ Louise Cort and Andrew Watsky, eds., *Chigusa and the Art of Tea* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; 2014); and Dora Ching, Louise Cort Louise, Andrew Watsky, eds., *Around Chigusa: Tea and the Arts of Sixteenth-Century Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ For example, see Taka Oshikiri, "The Shogun's Tea Jar: Ritual, Material Culture, and Political Authority in Early Modern Japan," *The Historical Journal*, 59, no. 4 (2016): 927–45.

¹⁵ A video of Chigusa being dressed is available from the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M48VBJCbE5Y>.

¹⁶ On the health benefits of matcha see Aleksandra Korn et al., "Exploring the Health Benefits of Matcha: A Comprehensive Review," *Journal of Education, Health and Sport* 68 (2024): 51235; and Joanna Kochman et al., "Health Benefits and Chemical Composition of Matcha Green Tea: A Review," *Molecules (Basel, Switzerland)* 26, no. 1 (2020).

¹⁷ Rebecca Corbett. "Green gruel? Pea soup? What Westerners thought of matcha when they tried it for the first time", *The Conversation*, September 3, 2025; Rebecca Corbett. "Thick Like Pea-Soup, Fragrant, and Not Very Palatable: Western Encounters with Chanoyu and Matcha in Meiji Japan." In *The Stories We Tell: Studies in the Culture, History, and Science of Tea*, Burnett, Katharine; Gundry, David; Shermain Hardesty and Roberta Holt (ed). Brill. Forthcoming (2027); and Ako Yoshino. "Japanese Tea Ceremony Demonstrations at U.S. World's Fairs: Cultural Branding as the Promotion of Japanese Tea, Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Centuries." In *The Stories We Tell: Studies in the Culture, History, and Science of Tea*, Burnett, Katharine; Gundry, David; Shermain Hardesty and Roberta Holt (ed). Brill. Forthcoming (2027).

¹⁸ Katharine Schuyler Baxter, *In Beautiful Japan: A Story of Bamboo Lands* (London: F. T. Neely, 1895): 321.

¹⁹ Robert Hellyer, *Green with Milk and Sugar: When Japan Filled America's Tea Cups* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

²⁰ The Countess de Montaignu, "The Celebrated Japanese Tea Ceremony," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MS), August 21, 1904: 55.

- ²¹ The Countess de Montaigu, “The Celebrated Japanese Tea Ceremony,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MS), August 21, 1904: 55.
- ²² See, for example: Kayla Steinberg, “It’s a real grind to meet matcha demand these days,” *NBC News Now*, August 5, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/matcha-shortage-higher-prices-tariffs-rcna223111>; Samuel Yang, “Shortage Brewing,” *ABC News* (Australia), July 16, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/programs/the-business/2025-07-16/matcha-mania-sparks-a-global-shortage/10553990>; and Business Insider, “[US is Japan’s biggest matcha buyer. It’s straining the industry.](#)” November 22, 2025.
- ²³ International Matcha Association. Emergency Joint Statement on the Integrity and Sustainable Development of the Global Matcha Market. May 5, 2026. <https://matcha-association.org/news/Zwoksked>.
- ²⁴ Lydia Venn, “2026’s most shocking April Fools’ Day jokes you missed, from Tesco, HEINZ, IKEA and more.” *Cosmopolitan*, April 1, 2026. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a70904280/2026-most-shocking-april-fools-day-jokes/>.
- ²⁵ Jack Bantock, “Ube is enjoying a purple reign in the US. That’s causing problems in the Philippines”, CNN, March 25, 2026. <https://www.cnn.com/travel/ube-purple-yam-philippines-trend-spc>.
- ²⁶ White, Haley M, Bailey R Meyer, Jared D McCormack, Holly P Lawson, and Emily D Niemeyer. “Comparison of Culinary and Ceremonial Matcha Green Teas: Relationship between Phytochemical Composition and Antioxidant Properties.” *Journal of Food Measurement & Characterization* (New York) 19, no. 9 (September 2025): 7070–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11694-025-03448-7>.
- ²⁷ Jack Bantock, “Ube is enjoying a purple reign in the US. That’s causing problems in the Philippines”, CNN, March 25, 2026. <https://www.cnn.com/travel/ube-purple-yam-philippines-trend-spc>.
- ²⁸ McGray, Douglas. “Japan’s Gross National Cool.” *Foreign Policy* (2002): 44.

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

- Why is it significant that in 1391 the Chinese Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang declared that only loose-leaf tea was acceptable as tribute?
- What are some of the ways that Japanese tea culture, including matcha, was influenced by or incorporated technologies and material culture from China?
- What are some examples of how matcha is linked to Japanese national identity?
- In what ways is matcha a global commodity?
- Why do you think matcha has exploded in popularity in the last decade?
- What is important about regulation of food and beverage labelling? Does it matter that a term like “ceremonial grade matcha” is unregulated?

Activities / Assignments

Historical Western Media Perspectives on Matcha

Have students individually search the Library of Congress [Chronicling America](#) historic newspaper database to search for articles on matcha or chanoyu between 1860–1910 and then report back on their findings to the class. Define the parameters of the search with suggested keywords such as “Japanese tea,” “matcha,” “chanoyu,” or “Japanese tea ceremony” and explain how to use Boolean operators for more precise results. Also, explain how to use facets to narrow down the initial search results by decade, newspaper title, or state (students might choose to search in their own state, for example). Have students select one article and make note of the search term used, the article title and date, and newspaper title, then provide a short summary of the article, say what they found interesting, intriguing, insightful, or puzzling about it to them, and how it relates to something discussed in class already. This can be done as an in-class activity, using a shared document like a Google Sheet with oral reporting back in groups or to the whole class, or it could be assigned as a take-home assignment. A follow-up discussion could take place on common themes identified across the articles students identified. As a comparative activity, students could conduct the same search with contemporary media and/or social media and answer the same questions, then compare and contrast with their historical newspaper findings.

Matcha Blind Tasting

If the teacher has access to several different blends of matcha, a whisk, small ceramic bowls or cups (tip: sake or sencha cups are a good size, or disposable paper cups can be used if preferred), and a temperature adjustable kettle in the classroom, an activity to have students blind taste different blends of matcha can be a useful tool for thinking about taste, smell, and perception. The teacher should check that all students are okay to drink caffeine and clear any other school-based procedures (e.g.: permission slips) before proceeding with the activity. I also suggest trying whisking a few bowls of tea at home first to make sure you are comfortable with using the equipment and know the quantities of tea and water. A good ratio to use for this activity is 2g of matcha per 60–80ml of water for every four students, i.e.: you are making one “standard” bowl of usucha and dividing it among four students. Keep in mind that if students have more than one and half standard bowls of thin tea by the end of the activity, which is what they would consume across the two rounds described below, they may feel the effects of the caffeine quite strongly, so more than two rounds is not recommended!

For the purposes outlined here, four different blends of matcha are used to have two rounds of blind tasting, but it is possible to scale down to one round with just two blends of matcha. The teacher should sift the matcha beforehand and move it from the branded packaging to a neutral container (a glass jar or plastic container works well), then label each container as 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, and 2C, and on a separate sheet of paper or their computer note which matcha is which, eg:

- 1A - Ikuchiyo, Kyoto
- 1B - Aoarashi Marukyu Koyamaen, Uji
- 1C - Ikuchiyo, Kyoto
- 2A Premium First Flush Organic Ceremonial Matcha, Chiran Farm, Uji
- 2B - Yomo no Kaori, Yamamasa Koyamen, Uji
- 2C - Yomo no Kaori, Yamamasa Koyamen, Uji

Using water that has reached 170–180F, the teacher should whisk one large bowl of usucha or several standard bowls of usucha for each tasting then pour small amounts into the bowls or cups for each student. A tip when whisking matcha to be poured out into smaller vessels is not to create too much froth, otherwise the froth will distribute differently across the bowls or cups, potentially affecting taste. The students should

taste the tea and make mental or written notes about how it tasted. After tasting matcha 1A, 1B, and 1C students are asked to write down whether they thought 1C was the same as 1A or 1B before the teacher reveals the correct answer. Continue with round two.

Students can reflect on their perception of how each serving of matcha tasted and how well they could guess whether tea C was the same as tea A or B. Options for incorporating specific comparisons include using Japanese and Chinese made matcha, or using matcha labelled as “ceremonial” and “culinary.” The blind tasting gives students the opportunity to evaluate the taste of the matcha without any preconceived bias. The experience can be made competitive among students, if the teacher wishes. For classes that cover premodern Japanese history, the activity can be paired with reading sections of the *Taiheiki*, a 14th-century epic saga, which include descriptions of tea tasting contests (*tōcha*) that were part of lavish entertainments and banquets held by elite warriors.

Glossary

Chanoyu: Literally “hot water for tea.” In English, often called “tea ceremony.” A sprawling complex of practices; lore; and economic, artistic, and spiritual undertakings focused on the preparation, serving, and consumption of matcha. Chanoyu emerged in Japan in the sixteenth century and from the seventeenth century, different lineages or schools of teaching developed. Chanoyu is practiced today in Japan and around the world by Japanese and non-Japanese practitioners.

Chasen: Literally “tea whisk.” A bamboo tool used for whisking matcha into hot water. First developed in China then imported to Japan in around 1250. In recent years there have been chasen made with materials other than bamboo, including resin and even paper, as well as mechanized chasen, however, the standard and typical chasen is made by hand by carving a single piece of bamboo into a whisk, splitting the bamboo into many tines at the top.

Chatsubo: Literally “tea jar.” Originally ceramic jars made in China for transporting goods, in Japan they were repurposed into tea-leaf storage jars, valued in chanoyu for their aesthetic properties of asymmetry and rusticity. As tea-leaf storage jars they are filled with freshly harvested tencha and transported to consumers. In Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many chatsubo were assigned personal names and became highly prized objects among chanoyu practitioners, with records of ownership and use recorded in writing. In autumn, the chatsubo were “dressed” with silk cloth and decorative cords, and special “mouth-cutting” tea gatherings were held to cut the seal on the jar and open the new crop of tea for the year.

Chausu: A stone grinder used to turn tencha into matcha. First developed in China then imported to Japan in around 1250. A modern mechanized chausu can produce about 30–40 grams of matcha an hour.

Koicha: Literally “thick tea.” Made by whisking, or kneading, a large amount of matcha into a small amount of hot water to form a paste-like consistency. In chanoyu, one bowl of koicha is shared among a group of guests, typically five guests at a formal tea-gathering, but if there are more or less guests, the amount of koicha per bowl and the number of bowls of koicha made will be adjusted by the host. For example, if there are nine guests the host will likely make one bowl for five guests and one bowl for four guests. In a chanoyu context, the host will prepare the koicha by using their senses, knowing how much matcha is needed for the number of guests by sight, and by using their smell and touch to know when the matcha is perfectly incorporated into the hot water to form a smooth, shiny paste. In modern terms, for each bowl of koicha 4–5 grams of matcha and 30 ml of hot water are used per person, i.e.: a bowl of koicha for five guests will use 20 grams of matcha and 150 ml of water. The highest grades of matcha are used for making koicha.

Matcha: Ground powder made from tencha, all parts of the plant other than the leaf are removed, such as veins and stem.

Tencha: Tea leaves hand harvested from the tip of a shade-grown tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) which are then heated by being steamed, crushed, and dried to go into matcha production.

Usucha: Literally “thin tea.” Made by whisking a small amount of matcha into hot water, in some schools of chanoyu it is whisked until a full layer of froth covers the tea. In chanoyu, each guest is served their own bowl of usucha. The host will typically use two scoops of matcha, measured using a *chashaku* (tea scoop), and half to two-thirds of a *hishaku* (bamboo ladle) of hot water. In modern terms a typical serving of thin tea uses 2 grams of matcha and 60–80ml of hot water.

Additional Resource

[Teaching Tea: Culture, History, Practice, Art on Japan Past & Present.](#)

This project is focused on the creation of accessible, multidisciplinary teaching resources on tea culture, history, practice, and art in Japan. Through the contributions of diverse scholars and tea practitioners, the project provides peer-reviewed essays, lesson plans and reading lists to improve the depth, breadth, and quality of higher education pedagogy on chanoyu.
