

History of Japanese tea

Tea drinking in China began long ago and was well established before the Christian era, after which it was further developed and refined during the Tang (618 – 907) and Sung (960 – 1279) periods.

Tea was first introduced to Japan in the Nara period (710 – 793) from China. However, it was not before the introducer of Zen Buddhism, the monk Yosai (Eisai), in 1191 brought tea seeds and knowledge about how to grow, produce and prepare tea, that the drinking of powdered green tea became widespread in Japan.

While the drinking of powdered green tea gradually fell out of fashion in China and replaced with infusion of tea leaves during the Mongol invasions, in Japan, it was continued and further refined under the influence of Zen and a new aesthetic culminating in the development of the all-encompassing culture known as Chanoyu or Chado, the Japanese tea ceremony, which was perfected by Sen no Rikyu (1522 – 1591).

In the middle of the 17th century, leaf tea was introduced by a Chinese Zen monk who built a temple near the tea gardens in Uji. Furthermore, a special Japanese way called Senchado which based on the Ming-style way of preparing leaf tea was soon developed. Thus in time, many varieties of original Japanese teas were produced and perfected.



The book "Kissa Yojoki"(Drinking Tea for Health) by Yosai (Eisai)

Varieties of Japanese tea

There are three main categories of tea: completely oxidized and fermented teas such as black teas, half-oxidized teas known as oolong teas and non-oxidized teas that are green. Most Japanese teas are green, and much is done to retain the beautiful green color of the fresh leaf together with all the health preserving properties and other important constituents of the tea leaf.

In Japan, there are two different methods of tea cultivation which give quite different results. One is to let the tea bushes grow and bud without any shade from the sun. This method was originally introduced from China for the growing of leaf tea and gives the most common tea in Japan known as Sencha. Another method is to shade the budding bushes completely. This method was originally developed in Japan for the production of fine powdered tea known as Matcha, but later extended to the production of the high-quality Japanese leaf tea known as Gyokuro.



Leaf harvest in Sencha tea estate



Leaf picking in Matcha tea garden

Benefits of powdered green tea (抹茶 Matcha)

To obtain all the health properties and other beneficial effects of tea, it is best to ingest the entire soft leaf tissue in the form of powdered green tea, Matcha. Some of the constituents in tea are not water soluble at all and only a third of the important catechins may be obtained in an infusion. The ancient Chinese notion of tea as a health improving and maintaining preventive medicine, that also may cure certain diseases, is also well founded according to modern scientific research. Besides, tea is known for its various anti-oxidative effects and also helps control of high blood pressure, counteracting senility and is preventive against diabetes and cancer, etc.



A bowl of delicious well-whisked Matcha



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