

the steeping room®

November Tea Club

Welcome to the November Tea Club! I'm super excited to send this month's tea to everyone. This is the first time we've sent out matcha as part of the Tea Club – it's a specially commissioned batch just for the club. It was ground about ten days ago and then it hopped on a plane to arrive just in time for November 1. Interestingly, while matcha may seem like a summery-breezy type of tea, the good stuff isn't usually released until October or so of the spring after it was picked because the tea producers like to give a chance for the processed tea leaves to mature and settle before they are ground into the powder we know as matcha.

There are so many different grades of matcha these days it can be really confusing to assess whether you actually enjoy matcha. You can purchase what appears to be a decent grade of matcha at the supermarket for \$10 or \$15 for a couple of ounces and then get home only to find it is grassy and chalky and not particularly pleasant. Matcha has experienced a huge surge of popularity since the late 1990s when Haagen Daaz introduced matcha ice cream. Shortly after that matcha lattes started to show up in Starbucks and the matcha boom was in high gear. Traditionally matcha has been the very pinnacle of Japanese tea so this huge demand for matcha products has meant that there are many more powdered green teas on the market being sold as 'matcha' without being clear about whether the matcha is designed to be added as an ingredient or whether it's appropriate to be prepared for bowl tea.

High quality matcha will be strong but mellow, not astringent or bitter. They are bright green and soft to the touch like flannel. They are also really quite expensive per gram and generally sold in 20 gram packets. Once you open the packet, you need to drink it within a month. This is one of the reasons the packet is so small. If you don't open the packet, then it will keep for a while - maybe three months or so - but it's not a tea to save for months and months while you wait for a special occasion. Go ahead and start drinking it all up. 20 grams will make about 10 bowls of tea so you've got plenty to keep you company.

Really high level matcha teas are quite expensive primarily because they are very labor intensive to make. They will come from unpruned tea gardens, be hand-picked, and only picked once per year (so the whole money-making potential of that bush comes only one time per year). When you get a tea that is only plucked once per year, you are getting the nutritional pinnacle of that plant in its first spring growth spurt. Everything it was storing up over the dormant season is in those first buds and tender new leaves. The bush hasn't been overworked throughout the year which is what happens to the vast majority of tea plants that exist in the world today. It is very unusual to find tea from plants that are only harvested one time a year.

The plants are always shaded for a minimum of 20 days and up to 60 days. The best matcha will be shaded by the traditional *honzu* technique with reeds and bamboo built into shelves above the plants that progressively block more of the sunlight (up to 95%!). This shading increases the chlorophyll and the *L-theanine* in the plant, making the tea sweeter and less astringent than it would otherwise be. In early May the plants are picked by very experienced tea pickers who pluck in near darkness! They pick only a bud and two tender leaves. The leaves are taken to the factory where they are steamed for about 20 seconds and then they go through a short series of drying, sorting, and baking steps. Interestingly the sorting step involves removing the veins and any stem from the leaves, so the end result of this process looks like little pieces of torn up dried leaves. At this early stage the tea is called *tencha* and it's put away to mature and rest for a few months until its ready to be

ground into matcha proper.

For the highest quality *tencha*, a stone mill will be used to grind the tea just before release to the market. The milling/grinding is slow because if it were to go too fast heat would be generated which would ruin the *tencha*. So the milling is quite slow -- each stone mill can grind about 40 grams of *tencha* per hour.

This particular matcha is from a multiple award winning, nationally recognized fifth generation tea maker named **Tsuji Kiyoharu**. His farm is in Shirakawa, Uji, Kyoto Region. Mr. Tsuji has developed unique and intensive tea farming practices that have led to exquisitely saturated, creamy, and delicious matcha. I was blown away when I first tried his matcha. I could easily (and did in fact!) drink bowl after bowl going through 20 grams in a flash. It's sweet and creamy, with aromas of custard and vanilla and just a hint of chocolate. It's substantial and powerful, but in no way overpowering. Just a very fine, subtle, and well put together matcha.

Tools Needed & Preparation

There are two styles of matcha preparation in Japan: *koicha* and *usucha*. *Koicha* is 'thick tea' while *usucha* is 'thin tea.' I'll be talking about *usucha* only from here on out, although this matcha is of a good enough quality to make *koicha*.

There are a few different schools of thought on matcha preparation, but by and large matcha is traditionally prepared in 70 to 80 ml servings. That's a little bit larger than a common double espresso, so we're talking just a few sips here.

What you'll need to make matcha:

1. A tea bowl (*chawan*).
If you don't have matcha bowl or tea bowl, then use a small bowl like a cereal bowl, rice bowl, or ice cream bowl. You could also use a large, wide-mouthed mug like something that might be designed for a café au lait.
2. 70 ml of nice, fresh water at 180 degrees F.
Because this is such fancy tea, if you want to grab some nice spring water it will make your tea even better. Generally, for lighter teas you're looking for a lighter water (in terms of total dissolved solids or "TDS") than what comes out of the tap.
3. One tablespoon room temp nice, fresh water
4. A baker's teaspoon (as in the kind you use to measure ingredients)
5. A *chasen* or matcha whisk.
A *chasen* is a whisk made just for matcha that is built out of a single short piece of bamboo. There are some workarounds for not having a *chasen*, but ideally you'd be whisking matcha using this specialized tool. I'm going to write down instructions for making matcha below with a *chasen* and then after that I'll discuss the workarounds, but... if you have the resources to get a *chasen* I really recommend it. You can find them online for between \$12 and \$20 usually. Look for something with at least 80 tines. We have them on our website as well.

A recommended way to make a serving of matcha:

1. Get your water ready by heating it to 180 degrees. If you have a *chasen* then prewarm it as well by standing it up with its tines down in a small dish of hot water.
2. Heat your tea bowl by pouring some hot water into it and then dry it out completely.
3. Add 2 grams of matcha to your bowl which is about 2 level (not packed tight) teaspoons of matcha. You can also just put your bowl on a gram scale, tare it, and then add the matcha up to 2 grams.
4. Add 10 ml of the room temp water (that's about a tablespoon) to the matcha in your bowl.
5. Using your *chasen*, whisk the matcha and the room temperature water really well until its velvety, smooth, and with no lumps.
6. Once it's nice and smooth, add 70 ml of the 180 degree water.
You can measure out 70 ml or you can weigh it if you have a gram scale (1 gram of water = 1 ml of water so you'd weigh out 70 grams of water in this case).
7. Whisk with your *chasen*, starting softly at the bottom of the tea bowl first.
Try to whisk with the **motion initiated at your wrist and using an M or W motion** instead of whisking in a circle. After a few seconds raise the *chasen* so it's not at the bottom of the bowl but still submerged under the surface. Whisk vigorously until you have a really nice carpet of foam on top. You can then finish up with two or three delicate circles on the top of the foam as you even out the bubbles and smooth out any of the larger ones so that you have a uniform-ish sea of beautiful matcha foam.
8. You are ready to drink!

Alternatives to using a bamboo whisk/*chasen*

1. You could use a mason jar with a lid and put the water and the tea in the jar and shake it vigorously until you get a nice foam. *You need to be careful and not have such hot of water that your jar breaks.* This is ideal for making chilled matcha so in this case using water at room temp or chilled water and then pouring it over a few pieces of ice is probably the best bet. Also, to make the mason jar technique well, you'd ideally sift your tea first so that it's not super lumpy.
2. You could use a battery-operated milk frother instead of a *chasen* (something like an Aerolatte or another similar brand). If you do this, the parameters in the original recipe remain the same.
3. You could use a kitchen whisk if you had to, but it won't make as nice a froth as a *chasen* or a handheld milk frother. Still, you could do it and it would be just fine.
4. Finally, if all else fails, and you really just want to dive in and get going with what you have then you can use a fork to whip it very vigorously like you're whipping eggs. This is the least ideal plan, but it's an option and no one will know but you.

I hope you enjoy your time with this matcha! Let me know what you think or if you have any questions by emailing me at tsronline@thesteepingroom.com or by starting a chat on our website. See you next month!