

*This is our second post in a series all about matcha.*

# The Road to Tencha

Matcha is a laborious, time-intensive process. Way before the steps of grinding and judging and tasting (more on that later), there is an arduous road to *tencha*, the name given to the processed tea leaves before it's milled into matcha.

Translating to “mortar/grind tea,” the later steps its destined for, tencha is the finished-unfinished product of growing, cultivating, and harvesting. If you're keen on your high-end Japanese teas, its cultivation is the same as gyokuro, the forest green, shade-grown tea, and shicha, the hand-picked first flush harvest. If you're not keen, here's how it grows - and as always, let's start from the very beginning.

In the winter, starting in late October, tea bushes begin to amass inorganic, organic, or ionic<sup>1</sup> soil-rooted nutrients<sup>2</sup> to prevent freezing to death. After blossoming in the spring, around early February, the tea bush thaws, resuming its growth. By feeding its sprouting buds after hibernation, the leaves release far more nutrients in its leaves than harvests of other seasons. These nutrients (amino acids, polyphenols, flavonols<sup>3</sup>, and the like) are responsible for that high-end taste: subtle sweetness, zero bitterness, zero astringency.

Growing multiple cultivars in their fields, farmers will shade the tea leaves for 20-28 days, depending on when those tea leaves sprout. Bamboo reeds were and are used traditionally, but suspended aluminum canopies and *kanreisha* curtains draped directly over the leaves are modern methods. Tea leaves that have **elevated shade** are reserved for exquisitely artisan harvests of gyokuro and matcha; tea leaves that have **direct shade** are considered lower-quality. Elevated shade means more space and temperature regulation for those tea bushes to grow. However, having to build and dismantle those shades at the beginning and end of each season is an extremely arduous process, which is where direct shade can be considered “efficient.”

Its high chlorophyll content produces a high amount of amino acids - throwback to l-theanine from our first post - making it a collective, concentrated powerhouse of the season and the soil.

The **method of harvesting** is also an important question to ask in matcha production. As you can imagine, the more labor-intensive it is, the smaller the yield (and the higher the care pre- and post-production). Though Japan has made incredible strides in machine harvest techniques (compared

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<sup>1</sup> **Inorganic**: mineral components that exist in rocks and soil particles; **organic**: material originating from living matter, which will become available to plants as they are subjected to biological processes such as decay; **ionic**: available nutrients that support current plant growth. (Hacker, Jan J. “Effects of Logging Residue Removal on Forest Sites.” *Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission*, Feb. 2005.)

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Stephen. “In the Dead of Winter, Plants Are Already Starting to Prepare for Spring - Underground.” *Public Radio International*, PRI, 28 Jan. 2018, [www.pri.org/stories/2018-01-28/dead-winter-plants-are-already-starting-prepare-spring-underground](http://www.pri.org/stories/2018-01-28/dead-winter-plants-are-already-starting-prepare-spring-underground).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, flavonols, a tea-specific, plant-based subclass of flavonoids, are extracted more efficiently depending on the grind of tea leaves. The finer, the better. This might be why matcha is considered health- and nutrient-dense. (Wang, Huafu, and Keith Helliwell. “Determination of Flavonols in Green and Black Tea Leaves and Green Tea Infusions by High-Performance Liquid Chromatography.” *Food Research International*, vol. 34, no. 2-3, 26 May 2001, pp. 223–227.)

to other machine-harvest teas, Japan's tea quality is distinctively uncompromising<sup>4</sup>), gyokuro, tencha, and shicha are best **hand-plucked**, as each tea leaf is picked discriminately to create a truly flawless tea.

After harvesting, the leaves must be quickly shipped to production. As these delicate tea leaves retain more moisture than its later heartier harvests, they should be processed within **24 hours** of plucking. First steamed, then de-stemmed and de-veined, and then dried, the finished tencha-unfinished matcha is an echo of how it will taste after grinding. It's a pale liquor with a deep and mellow flavor, with some saying it is "pure and elegant."<sup>5</sup> It resembles little of the unctuous, full-bodied matcha it will eventually become, which we'll detail in the next article.

If we went even further back than the seasons, it would involve a triad of factors: the farmers of the present, the farms of the near past, and the regions of the distant past.

The **history** of the region is important to take into consideration with quality matcha. The more established its tencha production is, most definitely the better. It means they got their shit on lock - in the case of the regions we source from, 800 to 1,000 years of artisanal shit on lock. Despite modern innovations in processing, construction, and technology, *nothing* has remotely come close to what the hands and years of tradition craft. Cities like **Yama**, of the Fukuoka Prefecture (where [Kodemari](#) and [Mokuren](#) are sourced from), and **Kyotanabe**, of the Kyoto Prefecture ([Toyo](#)), possess those techniques of preserved centuries prior.

The **legacy** of the farm, built in the geological trifecta of **elevation**<sup>6</sup> (250 - 400 meters above sea level is ideal; Yama's 680 meters is the highest of Japan's tea-producing regions), **field position** (sloped, shielded by nearby mountains/forests), and **weather** (temperate, but misty), is key to matcha's taste. These factors affect the integrity and health of the tea plant as well. Higher elevations and cooler temperatures stave off insects, mountain terrain results in a slower growth (especially for **spring harvests**, the best season to make matcha<sup>7</sup>), and less sunlight produces chlorophyll-intense leaves.

The **skill** of the farmers is crucial, as it goes without saying. Exemplary qualifications would mean the farm is **multi-generational**, with a 20-plus year ancestry that passes down its skills and techniques to the present. Specializing in tencha is a prerequisite, at least in sourcing our matcha. The ultra-specificity in Japanese tea production roles - from farmer to tencha processing to matcha making - means that every small, yet no less integral, step is meticulous and deliberate.

As you now know: even before it becomes matcha, tencha is an intensive, multi-layered process that requires care and precision. Budget "matcha" tends to be rare; if you find a Japanese-origin steal in your grocery store, it might be *konacha*, or powdered generic green tea. Because the demand has skyrocketed in Western markets, matcha products has been outsourced to China, Taiwan, and Japanese regions with no history of matcha production. The possible risks in choosing these

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<sup>4</sup> Carr, M.K.V. *Advances in Tea Agronomy*. Cambridge University Press. December 15, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Okay, like one blog saying it.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, Miriam H. Department of Chemistry and Geosciences. Jacksonville State University. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Summer harvests produce lower-grade matcha. Autumn harvests are fairly weak and produce culinary matcha at best, so avoid picking autumnal matcha if you come across it.

not-quite-matcha products is the quality and consumer oversight: Japan [has high quality standards](#) that few countries match.

**Tldr:** The road to tencha is a long winding one. You have quite the checklist to peruse, with outstanding bullet points to consider such as:

- The region oughta have a wide-spanning history of matcha production.
- The farm oughta have a wide-spanning history of tencha production.
- The farmers oughta be good.
- The season oughta be spring.
- The tea leaves oughta be disease-free.

## What do I do with this information?

Sure, it's a lot more than you need to know. Even if you don't get your matcha from us, it's important to know what to look for. *Maybe* a label will only provide some of those factors. *Maybe* you can't verify any of those factors. *Maybe* you're paying way too much for a substandard product.

Savvy (and stupid) marketing can focus on preexisting matcha hype, but that doesn't ensure high quality standards. With our matcha, you have complete transparency and disclosure: you know who it's from, where it's from, and all the whats and whys you can throw at us.

Want to go in-depth about matcha? Contact us at [order@spirittea.co](mailto:order@spirittea.co).

*Missed our kickoff post on the origins of matcha? [Here you go.](#)*