

Matcha, though currently marketed as a Dr. Oz panacea, is a unique subset of not only Japan's, but the entirety of tea's long-spanning history. To understand its place today and how it became such a cultural touchstone requires an extensive look to its past. However, even in a summation, matcha's history also has to touch upon the history of tea in China, the sociopolitical climate of Japan during the Edo period, some aspects about Buddhism sects and practices, its evolution from tea seed to tea ceremony in Japan, and a few monks. We totally understand if you skip over this part, but hey - we'll leave this as an FYI.

Matcha's Origin - A Long-Winded Journey

Matcha's first appearance in history stems from China, the purported birthplace of tea itself. From its very beginning, tea was seen as a rejuvenating herb that soothed the body and the soul. This was also a finding born out of complete serendipity: in 2737 BC, a servant of Emperor Shen Nong was heating water when dead leaves from a *Camellia sinensis* bush blew into it, boiling into a concoction that, to hell with precaution, the emperor found refreshing.

Fast-forward nearly 4,000 years later. In Song Dynastic China, between 960 - 1279 AD, tea was steamed, dried, ground into a fine powder, and whisked, and its rituals had evolved into one which centered around hospitality and social enjoyment. I know - I had the same question: how did this Chinese practice make its way to Japan?

A Tendai Buddhist monk from the Bitchu Province, Japan, Eisai, traveled from modern-day Okayama to Tiantai. Studying under the Zen school of Buddhism, Eisai would learn about the etiquette of tea brewing from chapters outlined in the *Chanyuan Qinggui*, or The Rules of Purity in the Zen Monastery, as tea-drinking was now parallel with Buddhist practice, meditation, and ritual. After his certification as a Zen master, he returned to Japan somewhere between 1191 and 1197, with tea seeds and scriptures in tow.

Eisai is credited with the beginning of the tea tradition in Japan through authoring *Kissa Yōjōki* (Drinking Tea for Health). Though today, matcha is beginning to be appreciated for its own unique taste, Eisai envisioned it as a cure and comfort to both societal and bodily ills.¹

An interesting correlation of green tea and bitterness may have its roots in Chinese medicine. In *Kissa Yōjōki*, he details the alignment of five elements (earth, fire, water, wood, and metal) with five major organs (the liver, lungs, heart, spleen, and kidneys). Each organ had a particular flavor (acidic, pungent, bitter, sweet, and salty); consistent balance was necessary for good health. Eisai believed that Japanese fare of the time lacked "bitter," which was thought to be the cause of heart disease. Green tea was bitter; ergo, it was heart healthy. However, this practice was reserved for the aristocracy, as high art tends to go.²

¹ Eisai's writing depends heavily on the idea that Buddhism is critical for a functioning society. The *Kōzen gokokuron*, another one of his works, is often regarded as nationalistic propaganda, and due to the compromises he made when working to install Zen Buddhism in Japan, some disregard the significance of the *Kōzen gokokuron* when reading it from a "Pure" Zen perspective. (*Zen Classics*. Heine, Steven and Dale S. Wright. Oxford University Press, 2006. Pg 94, 97.)

² Hansō, Sōshitsu. (1998). *The Japanese Way of Tea: From Its Origins in China to Sen Rikyū*, p.75.

Matcha would undergo yet another evolution in the 1400s where a tea master/Zen Buddhist, Murata Jukō, would father the rules and rituals of Japanese tea ceremony. Bequeathed to his student, Takeno Jōō, who then bequeathed it to his student, Sen no Rikyū, *chanoyu* was honed into a ceremony of austerity and a rejection of the material ornate. The undercurrent of *chanoyu* is *wabi-cha*, emphasizing simplicity and appreciating local ceramic wares and pragmatic style.

Jukō was the first master to serve tea to his guests himself and to simplify the tasting rules. As official tea master to the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, he stabilized the ceremony's core values of tenacious humility. Before, tea was enjoyed socially in salons. He said *fuck that*, let's add elements of stifling, hostage-like etiquette because we're taking *shit seriously now*.

There is little detailed information on Takeno Jōō, Jukō's pupil and successor. However, it is likely that adapting the Kyoto-based aristocratic-only privilege into a Sakai-centered merchant-accessible event. Apparently, he infused the ceremony with some good ol' Zen Buddhism, taking out Juko's altars to fine Chinese porcelain and adding tranquil, singular pieces of calligraphy and floral arrangements. His approach was imbued with "honesty, caution, and the strict emotional control typical of the wabi³ philosophy."⁴

Not to diminish the accomplishments of the first two tea masters, the last one, Sen No Rikyū, is the guy who established, formalized, and standardized *chanoyu* into what it is today. In its last traditional incarnation around 1587, it is a ceremony that is severely austere, Spartan-minimalist, and ultra-deliberate in the use of its objects. His vision encompasses the contemplation, self-awareness, and reflection sought between the material and immaterial, waxing paradoxical: it is necessary to hyperfocus the simplicity of the material to contrast the complexity of socialization, thereby transcending the mundane into the metaphysical.

Rikyū referred to the ware and its relationship with the tea ceremony, saying, "Though you wipe your hands and brush off the dust and dirt from the vessels, what is the use of all this fuss if the heart is still impure?"⁵

Tldr: Whisked tea began in China. A monk popularized it in Japan, wrote a book about it, and it was a populist appeal (that worked) to combat the rapid rotting of body and society. The next Buddhist, also a poet, gave it a Japanese overhaul. The Buddhist after that, also a poet, made it accessible to the merchant class. The Buddhist after that, the final poet, standardized it into the formal tea ceremony known as *chanoyu* that we know and love (exception: modern youth in Japan⁶) today.

³ Wabi-sabi, often cited as a top 10 entry of untranslatable words of the world, roughly conceptualizes a worldview centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. It is a concept derived from the Buddhist teaching of the three marks of existence (三法印 sanbōin), specifically impermanence (無常 mujō), suffering (苦 ku) and emptiness or absence of self-nature (空 kū). It's one of those words you can kinda gleam the meaning of, but it's a word that becomes its own rhetorical question. (Koren, Leonard (1994). *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*. Stone Bridge Press.)

⁴ The above two tea masters had info pulled from a blog post from Umi Tea Sets. ("The Japanese Tea Masters." *Umi Tea Sets*, 26 Sept. 2017, www.umiteasets.com/blog/the-japanese-tea-masters.html.) Unfortunately, it can't be verified on our end.

⁵ Sadler, A. L. *Cha-no-yu: The Japanese Tea Ceremony*. Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Tuttle, 1962. Another translation: you can clean all you want, but if you're a shitty person, all of this is for naught.

⁶ Noritoshi Furuichi, a Japanese sociologist, gleans over this in his book, *The Happy Youth of a Desperate Country*. Ryan also has insights from his travels.

So, What Even is Matcha?

With all of the above prefacing modern matcha, its most basic definition translates to “fine powdered tea.” Specifically, even at its lowest grade (more into that later), genuine matcha must be 1) made from tea leaves shade-grown for several weeks before harvesting, 2) after harvesting (*tencha*), must be de-stemmed and de-veined, 3) milled to a smooth, silky powder and 4) sourced from Japan. Preferably, matcha should come from Kyoto and Fukuoka prefectures, regions with the longest history of matcha production.

Due to the high international demand for matcha, countries like China or Taiwan have begun introducing a version of “matcha” that misleads the market. Countries outside of Japan can only approximate the processing methods and quality standards Japan enforces, which usually results in a cheaper product in taste and texture. Another aspect of matcha to consider is how its traditional process and preparation means ingesting whole tea leaves, not just a steeped essence. It has been nicknamed “the espresso of tea” by unimaginative ad execs, but still has a point: it is concentrated, strong, and only requires a small dose to pack a punch. The caffeine in matcha isn’t easily verifiable (sites range a serving can have 25mg to 68mg on average), but can⁷ have a singular effect that neither coffee nor tea replicates.

Caffeine, Theine, Theanine, Coffee and Tea

Coffee and tea both have caffeine - only tea’s was named theine back in 1827. They’re both the same molecule and the same kind of stimulant. The effects of caffeine absorption in the human body depends on leaf/bean process, brewing method, and leaf/bean quantity used.

However, the hot new(ish) thing in stateside matcha marketing is theanine (occasionally seen as l-theanine). This tea-specific (and some mushroom-specific) amino acid is lauded for its relaxing-yet-stimulating effects. Its chemical structure is similar to glutamate, a naturally occurring amino acid and neurotransmitter. Glutamate, released by nerve cells in the brain, is responsible for maintaining synaptic plasticity to a wide variety of important brain regions, like the hippocampus and neocortex. It’s a pretty big deal: glutamate plays an important role in learning and memory. So, theanine has some hype to it.

A big however is that theanine has insufficient evidence for a lot of its health benefits: reducing anxiety, high-blood pressure, and other myriad diseases. What it does have going for it is its effect on alpha wave activity, which is the state of mind when we’re conscious and relaxed. Think creativity, daydreaming, and focus. One particular study (and one of the few verifiable) says theanine did show a greater level of alpha wave activity, but at a relatively high dose of 50mg after 40 minutes of ingestion or so.⁸

There is also the disclosure at the end of the study where one of its authors is “an employee of Unilever, which markets food products some of which contain L-theanine and caffeine.” Take it for what you will.

⁷ Yes, all the *cans* and *shoulds* and *maybes* and *apparentlys* are added since many claims are said without substantial evidence. We like evidence.

⁸ Nobre, A. C., Rao, A., & Owen, G. N. (2008). L-theanine, a natural constituent in tea, and its effect on mental state. *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 17, 1st ser., 167-168.

Takeaway: Matcha's theanine + caffeine = America's superdrink; l-theanine can indeed help you achieve a state of dodey. But you might need Taylor/Jordan level consumption to get there, which by that time your caffeine reuptake will be so high there is substantial risk of discomfiting jitteriness. Hying up its health benefits, while lucrative, is not our thing.⁹

A Conclusion, Kind of

What can you do with this complicated origin story? Most likely, a lot of customers won't give a shit about monks and tea masters, and trying to condense this story's legends might sound Orientalist or so serious it immediately becomes self-parodying in spite of it.

But (!): knowing the philosophy behind it might give traditional house-served matcha a sense of craft, grace, grounding, and some semblance of "slowing down," which our company and many of our partners promote, and is as much a key narrative in third-wave coffee and now, tea.

Matcha is so commonly seen as a health additive upsell that it's rarely spotlighted as something remarkable in and of itself. When its taste is part of the product, it tends to be flat, one-note spinach. With our tiers, true matcha can be tasted, and better yet, enjoyed. However, this is not to degrade it as a culinary ingredient; our house matcha mixed in smoothies, blended with almond milk, or foamed into lattes can still make an exceptional serving.

Some ideas:

Easy implementation: Matcha lattes, quick whisk matcha shots (essentially usucha, "thin tea"), matcha shaken over ice, matcha with sparkling water/tonic, matcha plus ginger soda, matcha froyo, matcha cocktails (Thou Mayest makes a wicked Matcha Grasshopper with cream, honey, and mint), a drink that creates a clever pun that equivocates a Red Eye. Starbucks in Asian markets have a recipe for a matcha-esspresso fusion that sounds kinda like a caffeine OD/gross, but you do you, boo.

Level up implementation: A mini whisking ceremony for in-house drinkers! Preparing matcha with the customer in view just might be the Instagram-worthy experience customers crave, like plants to Brawndo. Traditionally, matcha is presented in a bowl, accompanied by a small sweet (like a red bean daifuku mochi). Dark chocolate, a pastry, a candy -- the pairing options are endless.

End boss implementation: Our ticketed Matcha Whisking Workshop with Alinea's Richard Alvarez was an un-intimidating way to introduce matcha to beginners.

⁹ Who would have thought that an unregulated industry would have misleading claims?