

Invitation to Ocha, Japanese Green Tea

As summer approaches on the 88th day from the setting-in of spring
Fields and mountains are filled with green leaves
Behold ho, it's tea picking
Working are girls, their sleeves tied back with a red sash and wearing a sedge hat.

“Cha-tsumi (tea picking),” a famous folk song of Uji, the tea producing area of Kyoto

By *Sasaki Hiroko*

A lovely view of endless expanse of tea garden. (Photo: NIHONCHA INSTRUCTOR ASSOCIATION)

Tea farms stretch on and on along the contours of the gentle mountain slope that has been faintly dyed yellowish green by the sprouting young tea leaves. It is a quiet early morning, the sun rising in the mist. By the time the morning dew on the tea leaves evaporated, tea pickers begin their work of the day, moving almost in synchronization. This is a scene of May that can be witnessed in many tea farms across Japan.

May is the tea leaf-harvesting season in Japan, and many Japanese look forward to the day when they can savor new tea. Tea leaf harvesting usually starts around May 2, 88 days after the first day of spring according to the lunar calendar, with fragrant, fresh green tea soon afterward hitting the market. Tea leaves are picked several times until autumn (twice to four times depending on the region) and processed. Tea made from tea leaves picked in early May is called *ichiban-cha* (first-crop tea). Tea made from leaves harvested thereafter is known as *niban-cha* (second-crop tea), *sanban-cha* (third-crop tea), and so on. *Ichiban-cha*, also known as *shin-cha* (new tea), is above all most flavorful because it is made from only soft leaves and twigs. Fresh flavor lasts only three to four months, so *shin-cha* is something special for Japanese tea drinkers.

History & Variety of Japanese Green Tea

It is not clear when Japanese began to drink tea, but references to the beverage are found in books dating back to the 8th century. Records show that

Japanese Buddhist priests who traveled to China for further enlightenment came across tea, which had already been spreading across the continent, and brought back tea seeds to Japan. Tea was initially used for medicinal purposes by itinerant priests as well as members of the imperial family and nobility, and then by the warrior class. Only in the Edo period (1603-1867) did tea drinking spread to commoners and become their beverage of choice. It took nearly 1,000 years to develop the uniquely Japanese way of savoring tea, as in *chanoyu* (tea ceremony), and to establish tea-producing and processing methods.

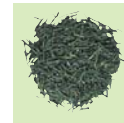
Like other varieties of tea such as black tea and oolong tea, Japanese green tea is made from the leaves of *Camellia Sinesis*, an evergreen plant of the *Camellia* family. One species of tea leaf can be used for various types of tea, depending on the way the tea leaves are processed. Unlike black tea, which is fermented, and oolong tea, which is half-fermented, green tea is not fermented. In making green tea, the tea leaves are first steamed at a high temperature and then ruffled in stages before being dried. Green tea, as the name implies, is green in color and has a pleasant fragrance and a refreshing flavor resembling fresh vegetables and herbs.

Since green tea is made by a simple processing method, it retains most of the nutrients contained in tea leaves. This is why green tea is drawing attention across the world for its healthful properties.

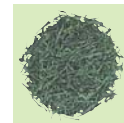
As there are many varieties of green tea, which differ in appearance and taste,

it may be difficult to decide which to choose.

The following explanation of the main types of green tea may serve as a guide.



Sen-cha – Basic Japanese green tea. Leaves are green, thin and needle-like. The extracted liquid is transparent and yellow-green in color. It has a pleasant and refreshing fragrance and a mellow and slightly astringent taste. It is the basic Japanese tea and its taste changes depending on the temperature of the hot water poured into the pot.



Gyokuro – “Jade Dew,” a Japanese tea of the highest quality. Leaves are dark green, very thin and needle-like. It has an elegant fragrance and sweet flavor. The extracted liquid is yellow-green and somewhat viscous. Tea leaves for *gyokuro*, covered and not exposed to direct sunlight before harvesting, are dried and matured after being steamed. This processing method boosts flavor-enhancing ingredients and produces a peculiar sweetness and flavor.

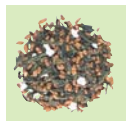


Ban-cha – Leaves are bigger and of a lighter color than *sen-cha*, and the extracted liquid is yellow-green. Its fragrance, sweetness and astringency are light and its flavor is also light. It is made from second-crop or third-crop tea leaves and is the most common tea used in daily life.

Photos of tea leaves by ITO EN, LTD.



Hoji-cha – Roasted tea. It has a brown color like brown ale beer and comes in various shapes because it is made by roasting *sen-cha* and *ban-cha* leaves at high temperatures. It has little astringency and bitterness and produces a refreshing flavor and pleasant fragrance.



Genmai-cha – A blended tea made by adding *genmai* (roasted, unpolished rice) to *sen-cha* or *ban-cha*. It is aromatic and recommended for first-time drinkers of Japanese tea. The extracted liquid is variously colored depending on the type of leaves. When *matcha* (powdered green tea) is added, the liquid is greenish in color.



Matcha – Powdered green tea. *Matcha* is made by grinding tea leaves such as those used for *gyokuro* in a stone mill. *Matcha* has a deep jade color and, when served, the powder is not extracted but is beaten into a froth with a tea whisk after hot water is added. *Matcha* is mostly featured in tea ceremonies, but also has other uses. For example, it is added to ice cream or pastries or made into cold soft drinks.

Usefulness of Japanese Green Tea

Recent scientific studies show that green tea has various beneficial properties, and the health effect produced by green tea catechin is drawing particular attention. Catechin, the ingredient which produces bitterness in tea, is contained in large amounts in black tea, oolong tea and green tea. In particular, Japanese green tea, such as *sen-cha*, contains a large amount of catechin. Catechin can prevent aging by oppressing the activities of active oxygen in the body; it can neutralize bacteria such as staphylococcus as well as viruses such as influenza; it can prevent lifestyle-related illness by controlling blood-sugar levels, blood pressure and cholesterol levels; and it can control intestinal functions by removing harmful bacteria. Its ability to prevent bad breath and tooth decay has also been substantiated. Above all, studies show that Japanese green tea prevents cancer, hence the high expectations placed on green tea as an anticancer agent.

Among various ingredients contained in green tea, vitamin C should be specially noted. Most varieties of tea contain a small amount of vitamin C, but it exists in large amounts in unfermented Japanese green tea, which can therefore provide a significant source of vitamin C



Photo: NIHONCHA INSTRUCTOR ASSOCIATION

In the traditional practice of processing tea leaves, steamed leaves are rumped up to make it easier for their ingredients to seep out when served.

in the human diet.

Japanese green tea is a useful and highly functional drink and can be ordered from anywhere these days thanks to the opening of green tea shops throughout the world and the spread of online shopping. Since May is the best time of the year to savor Japanese green tea, why not take this opportunity to try Japanese green tea with your family and friends? **J.S**

Sasaki Hiroko is a writer on food-related issues and a program coordinator/guest instructor for A TASTE OF CULTURE culinary arts programs which offer opportunities for foreign residents and visitors from abroad.

Let's Enjoy Green Tea Time!

<How to brew *sen-cha*>

(for 3-4 portions/80 cc per portion)

Amount of tea leaves: 10 g. (2 Tbsp)

Amount of hot water: 240-320 cc. (scant 1 - 1+1/3 cup)

Pour boiling water into cups in which the tea will be served and wait for 30 seconds. Cups are then warmed while the temperature of the hot water comes down to a suitable 70-80 C. Place tea leaves in the pot and add the hot water from the cups. Let steep for a minute or two before serving in the warmed cups. For a second brew, use hot water of 90 C for a bitter taste. The higher the quality of the tea leaves, the lower the water temperature should be, so that bitterness is controlled and sweetness stands out.

<How to brew *gyokuro*>

(for 3-4 portions/30 cc per portion)

Amount of tea leaves: 10 g. (2 Tbsp)

Amount of hot water: 90-120 cc. (scant 1/3 - 1/2 cup)

Pour boiling water into the pot and wait for about two minutes,

then transfer to the cups so that both the pot and cups are warmed while the hot water cools down to 50-60 C. Then place the tea leaves in the pot and add the hot water from the cups back to the pot. Let steep for 2 to 2 1/2 minutes before serving. For a second brew, add hotter water (70-80 C.) for a smoother taste. Since *gyokuro* should be sipped slowly, both the pot and cups to be used for *gyokuro* should be small.



Photo: NIHONCHA INSTRUCTOR ASSOCIATION

<How to brew *ban-cha*, *hoji-cha* and *genmai-cha*>

(for 3-4 portions/130 cc per portion)

Amount of tea leaves: 15 g. (3 Tbsp)

Amount of hot water: 400-600 cc. (scant 1+2/3 - 2+1/2 cup)

Put tea leaves in the pot and add boiling water. Let steep for 30 seconds and serve.

Ban-cha, *hoji-cha* and *genmai-cha* are lower-grade teas and so are easier to prepare. Just pour boiling water over the leaves to enhance the flavor as desired and drink as much as you like.