

Long History and Cultural Traditions

Uji Green Tea and Yamashiro Region, Kyoto Prefecture



History and Culture of Uji Green Tea

Tea Drinking Culture

The various tea drinking cultures around the world can be roughly classified into the following types: the black tea culture (fermented tea) in the United Kingdom; semi-fermented tea culture, including oolong tea, in China; and the green tea culture in Japan. All of these types of tea originated in China. In accordance with the consumer tastes and preferences of each country, the quality of tea has improved and different drinking methods have been devised, resulting in the formation of diverse tea drinking cultures.

In the United Kingdom, people have long enjoyed black tea by adding milk, sugar or flavoring agents, and in various other ways. This has led to a variety of styles within black tea culture, including various tea-serving utensils and settings.

Concerning green tea, *matcha* tea (powdered green tea) was introduced to Japan towards the end of the 12th century. Through the invention of the *oishita* (covered) cultivation method, *matcha* tea was refined to have a richer taste and a deep green color. The production and consumption of *matcha* tea were promoted by the rulers of the time, and the culture of the tea ceremony flourished mainly among the warrior class. Meanwhile, a method of making *sencha* tea (non-powdered green tea) was developed in Ujitawara in the 18th century. In addition to its refreshing flavor as well as astringency and bitterness, *sencha* tea features a savory taste imparted by an amino acid. *Sencha* tea became widely popular, creating a tea drinking culture for the literati and common people alike.

History

Birth of Uji green tea

(Heian Period [794-1192] - Kamakura Period [1192-1333])

In 1191, Zen master Eisai (1141-1215) brought back tea seeds from China to Japan, and gifted some of these seeds to Myoe Shonin (1173-1232), a high-ranking monk of Kozanji Temple in Toganoo, Kyoto. Myoe planted them in the temple grounds to make a tea garden, and distributed the harvested tea seeds to Uji and various other parts of Japan.

The Nation's Best Tea (Muromachi Period [1333-1573])

Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1408), the third shogun of the Muromachi shogunate, encouraged the cultivation of green tea in the Uji area, and developed special tea gardens called "Uji Shichimeien (the seven excellent tea gardens in Uji)." At that time, tea made in Toganoo was called *honcha* (literally, "real tea"), which was distinguished from *hicha* (tea other than *honcha*) produced in other places. However, as a result of diligent efforts by tea-making experts in Uji, Uji green tea came to exceed *honcho* in both terms of taste and production volume. Uji green tea subsequently replaced Toganoo tea to be called "*honcha*."

Tea Ceremony Culture (Azuchi-Momoyama Period [1573-1603])

Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), who served as a tea master for the contemporary rulers, perfected the art of the tea ceremony. Rikyu is said to have frequented Uji to taste newly-picked tea and hold tea ceremonies, whereby he furthered the influence of the Uji green tea industry. Even after the death of Rikyu, the tradition of the *wabicha* (simple and quiet, literally “forlorn tea”) style of tea ceremony was passed on, and Uji green tea established its position as the nation’s best tea.

Tea for the Shogunate and tea for ordinary people (Edo Period [1603-1868] – Meiji Period [1868-1912])

In the Edo Period, Uji green tea became increasingly famous. Tea growers in Uji had the exclusive right to produce the tea to be presented to the Imperial Palace and the Tokugawa Shogunate family.

On the other hand, it is said that in 1738, Nagatani Soen, who lived in present-day Ujitawara Town, invented the Uji green tea processing method, which serves as the standard method for green tea production used in Japan even today. This invention led to the widespread use of Uji green tea among the general populace.

Uji green tea was grown in areas that now make up Kyoto, Shiga, Nara and Mie Prefectures, and processed in the Yamashiro region (Kyoto), from where the processed tea was distributed nationwide. In the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate, with the opening of the ports of Yokohama and Kobe to foreign countries ended Japan’s period of national isolation, the production and export of green tea were encouraged, so that Uji green tea was exported overseas as well.

Tea cultivation

Climate and geographic features

Tea-producing areas in Japan are located in river basins and mountain-ringed regions, both of which have generally a warm climate but experience great differences in temperature between day and night. The regions, through which the Uji River, Kizu River and other rivers run, have long been renowned for producing excellent green tea. Thick river fogs and mists hanging over mountainous areas in river basins are considered to help grow high-quality tea.

Tea cultivation and tea making

One of the characteristics of Uji green tea growing is the *oishita* (literally “under cover”) cultivation method. Under this method, tea fields are covered and shaded from the sunlight with reeds and straw during the early summer when new sprouts of tea leaves grow. This is effective in allowing the sprouts to grow into soft, young leaves and preventing damage by frost, so that the tea leaves have a distinctive aroma.

Sencha tea (non-powdered green tea), made by steaming and kneading young tea leaves, has been popularized across the country as a new tea product, with a refreshing aroma and clear taste. The method to make *sencha* tea has also been disseminated as a Uji green tea processing method to tea-growing regions nationwide.

Gyokuro is a refined green tea, which was originally produced by accident during the process of stirring tea leaves picked from the *oishita chaen* (covered tea garden). *Gyokuro* has now come to occupy a pivotal position among high-quality Uji green tea.

Tea Field Landscapes

Uji City

Okunoyama-en, one of the Seven Excellent Tea Gardens in Uji

Uji green tea became famous across the nation in the Muromachi Period (1333-1573). Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1408), the third shogun of the Muromachi bakufu, developed seven tea gardens in Uji, which later became called "Uji Shichimeien (seven excellent tea gardens in Uji)." These tea gardens were so splendid that a poem was composed listing their names, i.e., Mori, Iwai, Umonji, Kawashimo, Okunoyama, Asahi and Biwa. However, of these seven, the Okunoyama-en (tea garden) is the only one remaining today. Uji green tea is still cultivated in Okunoyama-en.



Joyo City

Dry riverbed tea fields

Joyo City is known for its a high-quality *tencha* tea producing area. One can see vast tea fields equipped with frames for shading covers in the areas along the Kizu River and its dry riverbed.

※*Tencha* tea

(dried tea leaves, the ingredient of *matcha* tea)

To make *tencha* tea, young tea leaves grown in tea fields that are covered and shaded from the direct sunlight are harvested. These picked leaves are steamed and dried without being kneaded. *Tencha* tea is flavorful and rich full-bodied taste.

Ujitawara Town

Large-scale collective tea plantations

Ujitawara Town is part of the major Uji green tea growing area. Tea fields are located mainly in the hilly terrain behind the communities. In recent years, the development of large-scale collective tea plantations has been under way to improve production efficiency. Stand in the middle of the tea plantations of Oyama (in Iwayama) and Obuku (in Yuyadani), and you will almost feel as if you were a different world surrounded by a sea of tea fields.



Kizugawa City

Tea fields extending up into the mountain forests

The major tea-producing areas of Kizugawa City are the Yamashiro-cho district in the northern part of the city, and the Kamo-cho district in the city's eastern part. In the Kamo-cho district, tea fields stretch from the base of the slope up almost to the hilltop, creating a landscape characteristic of the Minamiyamashiro region. These tea fields make use of the terrain in this area, which has a large variety of surface features. From these tea fields, you can command a view of a nostalgic satoyama (literally "village forest," which refers to natural woodland that coexists with a nearby populated area), the Kuni-kyo Palace ruins, of great historical interest, and the Kizu River, all of which form a cultural landscape.



Wazuka Town

A fairytale land of Tea

Wazuka Town produces savory, fine tea, taking advantage of its high altitude and other geographical and climatic conditions resulting in large temperature variations,

The local tea farmers take great care. The town boasts a long history of tea cultivation continuing to the present day, having gone through both tea export booms and periods of slowdown. It is said that farmers in the past manually cultivated the tea fields with a spade. These tea fields are situated on steep slopes, offering a wonderful landscape created by mountains and tea fields in harmony with the local communities.

Minamiyamashiro Village

The Secret Tea Fields

Many of the tea fields in Minamiyamashiro Village are located in a remote mountainous area. To reach these tea fields, you have to go along farm roads lined with trees. After pushing your way through long and narrow roads while anxiously waiting for the destination to appear, you finally reach a clearing and vast tea fields appear before your eyes.

The landscape created by tea trees beautifully planted on each ridge of the field creates the appearance of geometrical patterns. Particularly in the early summer season of gentle breezes, it is hard not to let out a sigh of admiration at the sight of the beautiful tea leaves shining in the sunlight.



Yamashiro, where tea inspires culture

Uji City

City of tea and the Tale of Genji

Uji City lends its name to the famous Uji green tea. It is believed that the Buddhist monk Myoe (1173-1232) of the Toganoo Kozan-ji Temple introduced tea cultivation to Uji in the early part of the Kamakura period (1192-1333). Green tea has evolved as an integral part of the city, nurtured by its natural environment alongside the Uji River, with its gentle morning dews, and local tea-growing techniques as seen in *oishita-en* (shaded tea farms). Uji is also known as the scene of the last part of the Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu (c. 978?-c. 1016?). Historical sites reminiscent of olden times are scattered here and there, ready to transport visitors to the imaginary world of classic court literature. Visit Uji and enjoy a historic promenade, enveloped by the refreshing aroma of Uji green tea.



Joyo City

City of greenery, sunshine and peace

Joyo was designated as Kyoto Prefecture's eighth city in May 1972. Situated five *ri* from both Kyoto and Nara (1*ri*=approx. 40000 meters), Joyo has an ambience typical of the Minamiyamashiro region, with ancient burial mounds, historical sites, temples and shrines. The city's abundant underground water supplies support the cultivation of its various specialties, including flowering plants (iris, calla, etc), *ume* plum trees (the Aodani Ume Grove in Joyo is the largest in Kyoto Prefecture), Terada sweet potatoes, figs, tea cultivated on the shores of the Kizu River, and gold and silver threads (of which Joyo is Japan's largest producer). Within the Minamiyamashiro region, a famous Uji green tea producing area, Joyo sets itself apart as a major production center of *tencha* tea, one of the ingredients of *matcha* tea (powdered green tea). The quality of Joyo's tea growing is officially recognized, with some local tea growers receiving awards from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. In every October, the Joyo Tea Festival is held on the grounds of Arami Shrine to promote Joyo-grown tea and the regional culture surrounding tea production.

Yawata City

Expanses of fields rich in history and culture

Yawata City is located at the point where the Kizu, Uji and Katsura Rivers meet in the southwestern part of Kyoto Prefecture. Since Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu Shrine was relocated there in 860, Yawata has evolved into the shrine's gateway, witnessing many historic events. In 1972, the city experienced a population explosion following the opening of Otokoyama Housing Estate. In 1977, Yawata was incorporated as a city. Today, the city pursues development while maintaining a balance between its urban environment and a vast rural area rich in history and culture. Iwashimizu Hachiman-gu Shrine continues the rare tradition of ritual tea offering. Tea leaves from Otokoyama Tea Farm, on the grounds of the Shrine, are used in its festivals and tea ceremonies.



Kyotanabe City

Home of Ikkyu and *gyokuro* tea

Kyotanabe stands roughly at the heart of the Kyoto-Osaka-Nara triangle. Developed in ancient times, Kyotanabe has many ruins and cultural assets dating back to the Manyo period (7th-8th centuries). Representative sites of historical interest include Tsutsuki Palace, where Emperor Keitai (reign: 507-531) installed the capital, and Shuon-an, also known as Ikkyu-ji Temple, where the Zen Buddhist monk Ikkyu (1394-1481), popularly admired for his wit, spent his last years. As the seat of Kansai Science City, where Doshisha University and various research institutions are concentrated, Kyotanabe continues to grow as an active cultural center. Tea from Kyotanabe is known as *gyokuro*, of the highest quality, grown in the morning dew along the Kizu River and gently picked by hand.



Kizugawa City

Home to the Tea wholesalers street

Following the opening of Kobe Port at the end of the Edo Period (mid-19th century), Yamashiro-grown tea was transported along the waterways from Kamikoma Hama to Kobe via the Kizu and Yodo Rivers to be exported to countries around the world. Kamikoma District on the Kizu River shore was crowded with numerous tea wholesalers throughout the Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras. Today, there are far fewer tea

wholesalers here, but a faint aroma of tea always wafts through the air, typical of Yamashiro, the home of tea.

Ide Town

A town of nature's blessings and literary imagery

Ide, the home of the Tachibana Clan, has been frequented since olden times by lovers of art and literature. Japanese globeflowers by the Tama River have inspired many *ukiyo*e and classical poems. Today, the town attracts many tourists in spring who come to view cherry trees in bloom along the Tama embankment and weeping cherry trees on the grounds of Jizozen-in Temple.

Ide Town's other tourist attractions include Taisho Pond, Mantoroyama Observatory and Ryuo Waterfall, as well as holiday farms where visitors can pick *kaki* (persimmons), *mikan* oranges and other fruits.

Ide is also rich in literary imagery: the 9th-century poet of legendary beauty Ono-no Komachi is believed to have spent part of her life here, and part of the 14th-century historical epic *Taiheiki* was set in Ide. The town is also richly blessed by nature, and tea is grown on farms between mountain ranges. On Midori Farm, The Old Yamashiro Road Tea Explorers group organize an "enjoy your personally blended tea" party on the third Sunday of every month: Also, in May each year, tourists can enjoy picking tea leaves.



Ujitawara Town

Home of Japanese green tea

Ujitawara is a major tea producer that supports Uji as Japan's main tea production center. The town is ideal for tea cultivation due to its climatic and environmental conditions such as the large difference between daytime and nighttime temperatures and the clear Uji River. The local tea farmers also make extra efforts to improve the quality of their tea. In Ujitawara, tea-related historical episodes abound. The first tea farms in the town were cultivated in Ofukudani District in the Kamakura Period, and because of its excellent taste, Ujitawara tea was offered to imperial consorts and shoguns. In the Edo Period, Nagatani Soen, a Yuyadani-based tea grower, invented the green tea processing method (which involves steaming, kneading, and drying), which gave birth to beautiful green tea as it is known and loved today.



Wazuka Town

Producing authentic tea in a tea paradise

Wazuka developed as a town after the construction of the highway linking Kuni-kyo, the capital established by Emperor Shomu (701-756) in 740, and Shigarakinomiya Palace. The town was also a supplier of building materials for imperial use and for temples and shrines such as Todai-ji Temple in Nara. Wazuka is a tranquil and open town, with the Wazuka River running through the central area and Mt. Jubu (686.7 meters), the town's highest point, offering a panoramic view of tea farms in all directions. Under its ideal climate and on the soil equally ideal for tea growing, Wazuka has been cultivating highly aromatic *sencha* tea of the finest quality since olden times. Today, Wazuka produces over 45% of Uji green tea. The taste and aroma of Wazuka-grown tea is the town's pride.



In a rich natural environment, Wazuka, as the home of *sencha* tea, strives to preserve its traditions, while at the same time seeking to innovate in order to create tea that is desired and selected from among many others.

Minamiyamashiro Village

Home of Uji green tea

An Uji green tea production center, Minamiyamashiro Village has been growing *sencha* tea since the old days. The village's tea production accounts for 27% (the second largest producer) of Kyoto Prefecture's total output.

Thanks to its ideal climate and soil, Minamiyamashiro produces *sencha* tea and *kabusecha*, with a distinctive aroma typical of the region. Minamiyamashiro is confident and proud of its tea-growing excellence: in nationwide and regional tea fairs, the village's tea has received accolades, including the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Award in the ordinary tea category and the producer award in Kyoto Prefecture's contest for 13 consecutive years.

