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Global menu: Japanese tea, from A to Z

By Kimiko Barber

Tea that came straight from a premium tea farm in Japan is sure to be top-notch. But how best to prepare it?

Akihiro Kita was so struck by a single cup of tea he was served 10 years ago, in the premium tea-growing district of Uji, south of Kyoto, he decided to grow his own. He abandoned his university course, apprenticed in a tea farm and, in 2004, set up a plantation named Obubu (Kyoto dialect for tea) with another young man, Yasuharu Matsumoto, in the remote hillside village of Wazuka in Uji. When I visited last spring, as the new season's tea-picking was underway, it was my turn to be impressed. I paid up to become an Obubu plot-owner – entitling me to 3.3sq m with about 12 tea bushes.

Since then I have been enjoying 200g of fresh seasonal teas sent by Obubu every other month for ¥80 (60p) a day. But my preparation of the teas was not equal to their quality. When I heard that one of the oldest Japanese teashops, Ippôdô, was giving courses in how to make a perfect cup at So Restaurant in Soho, I signed up.

Ippôdô was first established a stone's throw away from the Kyoto Imperial Palace in 1717 and assumed its current name in 1846. Ippô-dô literally means "one promise", after a nobleman reputedly asked the shopkeeper to promise never to sell anything but fine tea, so taken was he by its quality.

Whether a regular builder's cuppa or green tea prepared by a venerable tea master in

the Japanese tea ceremony, all teas come from the same generic bush, Camellia sinensis. It is through processing it that we obtain the three basic types: the fermented variety such as Indian teas; semi-fermented ones such as Chinese Oolong tea; and non-fermented Japanese green teas.

Although tea was first introduced to Japan from China as far back as the seventh century, it remained an upper-class luxury. Eisai, a 12th-century Zen monk, promoted tea-growing around the hillsides of Kyoto. Before long, the samurai class embraced the tea-drinking habit and held riotous gambling parties, waging bets on where teas were grown. In the 16th century, tea master Sen-no-Rikyû perfected the tea ceremony and elevated tea to the highest art form, shaping Japanese cuisine, ceramics and even architecture. Until the mid-18th century, when the method of delicately hand-rolling leaves was developed, tea was drunk in fine-ground powdered form called matcha. When a tea-processing machine was introduced in the early 1920s, ordinary people were finally admitted into the formerly exclusive world of green tea – although we still struggle to make it.

Ippôdô tea canisters

Japanese green tea comes in two forms; matcha, used primarily in the tea ceremony, and the rolled-leaf type, of which there are many varieties. Among these is gyokuro, or "jade dew", which is pale green as its name suggests. Its fine aromatic taste comes from being grown in the shade for 20 days before being harvested. Sencha, which literally means "infused tea", is the most common green tea in Japan and is made from the first and second flush of leaves that are exposed to sunlight. The coarse third- and fourth-flush leaves are made into bancha for everyday use. Bancha-based products include roasted hõjicha, with a smoky aroma, and genmaicha, a mixture of tea and roasted brown rice.

At the So Restaurant masterclass, our diminutive instructor, Nao Yamanaka, began by measuring two heaped dessertspoons of Ippôdô's premium-grade sencha into a small teapot.

She then transferred about a regular coffee mug of boiling water into teacups to cool it down to the optimal 80C before filling the teapot, infusing for a minute and gently pouring into the teacups, extracting every drop.

This looked similar to the way I had been making tea – but had a startlingly different result. First, I realised that I had been too mean with the tea, and while the temperature and amount of water I had been using were about right, I was infusing the tea for too long so that the refreshing aroma and the subtle astringent sweetness had gone, leaving a residual underlying bitterness.

One last thing – the quality of water is paramount: use Volvic (not Evian or other hard mineral waters) and definitely not unfiltered tap water.

The tea farmers' labours are no longer being wasted, although my own have increased.

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Five top tea tips

1. For gyokuro, use two heaped dessertspoons (about 10g) with 80ml of water at 60C and steep for 90 seconds. This makes two to three espresso-size teacups.

2. For sencha, use the same quantity of tea leaves with 210ml water at 80C. Infuse for one minute.

3. For second and third infusions (for both gyokuro and sencha), no steeping is required, but the water temperatures must be as above.

4. To cool boiling water, transfer the water four times (for 60C for gyokuro), or twice (80C for sencha) before filling the teapot.

5. Try buying small quantities of tea leaves and once opened use up within two to three weeks. Store in airtight containers in a dark, cool place but do not refrigerate. Unopened packets of tea can be deep-frozen.

Where to buy

Obubu obubu@obubu.com

Ippôdô www.ippodo-tea.co.jp

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