

SAYURI

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THE MATCHA GRADE SCALE – IS MORE EXPENSIVE ALWAYS BETTER?

The UK's first female tea sensei and SAYURI founder, Yureeka Yasuda, takes us through her top 5 tips for choosing the perfect matcha

Matcha has been part of Japanese culture for more than 800 years and was used for centuries by Zen monks to calm the mind, energise the body, refresh the spirit, and help achieve enlightenment.

Fast forward to today, and the preparation and representation of *chadō*, or 'the way of tea', continues to be an integral Japanese cultural activity. In fact, 'the way of tea' is counted as one of the three classical Japanese arts of refinement, alongside calligraphy *shodo* and flower arrangement *kado*.

Tokyo-born, UK-resident Yureeka Yasuda has a job description that reads like a lifestyle wish list: serial entrepreneur, art advisor, brand ambassador, cultural curator, internationally published writer, and the **UK's first female tea sensei**. More about Yureeka [HERE](#).

Whether it's via a cup of hand-picked and deep-steamed sencha or organic matcha bursting with chlorophyll, Yureeka believes there's a green tea or matcha out there for everyone. She explains, "I didn't start appreciating matcha like I do now until my mid-20s. Initially, I was drawn to its health benefits, but after studying the philosophy of "*chadō*" and learning that there's a deeper world behind this magical green powder, it's completely replaced coffee in my daily routine."

Yureeka makes time every single day to prepare matcha at home in the traditional method, as an act of self-care and mindfulness. She encourages everyone to take five minutes each day to reconnect with themselves and shares her top 5 tips for incorporating ancient zen mindfulness into your daily routine.

What is matcha?

Matcha is made by pulverising shade-grown green tea leaves into a fine powder and whisked in water to create a frothy liquid that you drink. It's an antioxidant powerhouse that boosts the immune system and improves memory and concentration.

However, not all matcha is created equal. Although it all comes from the same plant (*Camellia sinensis*), the various growing methods and harvesting times will drastically change the final product. As a tea sommelier (and a personal aficionado) I've learned first-hand what makes the best matcha and how to align that with your personal taste/ OR and how to avoid the awful stuff that give matcha a bad reputation for being too bitter. So, I've pulled together my best tips to help you choose the right one for you.

Top 5 Tips for Choosing the Perfect Matcha

1. Think about the grade/ harvest

The quality of matcha is determined by terroir, cultivar (single or blend), cultivation process (hand or machine-picked), harvest (first, second or a blend) and process method (stone-milled or machine-pressed). While that seems confusing, each of those items plays into the grade of matcha. And there are generally two grades of matcha: ceremonial and premium.

For matcha beginners, I want to ensure your standards and tastebuds are set correctly. So, I recommend ceremonial matcha which would use leaves from the first flush, or spring harvest. This shade growing method results in a richer, sweeter flavour of matcha tea. With this grade, only the young delicate tea leaves are

harvested, and those contain more chlorophyll, photo nutrients, caffeine, and L-theanine than the older tea leaves which are harvested later in the year. Try it straight or diluted down with water (like an “americano”) as the delicate nuances and pure aroma will be smothered by the addition of milk, sugar or soy products.

If you find that pure ceremonial matcha is a too intense in flavour (or too pricey for everyday use), I suggest buying premium matcha (usually a mixed flush of spring and other harvests) and enjoying it as a latte. The rather astringent bold taste is necessary to keep the matcha flavour when mixing with other ingredients, but vegan milk (oat, soy, almond, coconut, etc) will make it sweeter and more enjoyable, particularly for novice matcha drinkers. And of course, it’s perfectly acceptable to add honey or sugar if you prefer it sweeter.

Also note that grade classification and pricing is entirely up to the individual brand, so always purchase matcha from a trusted, authentic source who can verify where they get their matcha from, how it is grown, how the grade is selected and how it is processed.

2. Check the colour

This is the easiest quality for amateur matcha drinkers to look out for. High quality matcha typically results in a more vibrant, brilliant green – the greener, the better! This indicates the leaves were grown in shade, which is what gives matcha its superior health benefits (up to 137 times more antioxidant than a low-grade green tea) heading the leaves allows the chlorophyll (green pigment) and all its nutritional properties to move upwards to the tips of the leaves in search of light.

Several weeks prior to the harvest season in spring, the tea leaves are covered to block out the sunlight. A dull colour can indicate the leaves were picked late, after they’d been exposed to sunlight. And this means less health benefits, less subtle, nuanced flavours and less enjoyment!

Matcha that has been oxidized by improper storage or air exposure during the production can make it turn pale or brown. Because matcha is such a fine powder, exposure to the air will cause it to degrade very quickly, therefore it must be stored in airtight containers in a cool, dark place. As a good rule, matcha that is sold in glass jars or clear plastic containers is a bad sign and should be avoided! Even the highest quality matcha will quickly degrade if not properly packaged.

3. Trace its origin/ is it organic?

Matcha is to Japan as Champagne is to France, therefore anything produced outside of Japan is often not monitored and may simply be ‘powdered green tea’. While this might seem simply like an affectation, it’s far more than that. In fact, when I first began drinking matcha, I found that not a single organic matcha brand I purchased outside of Japan could match the flavours and incredible satisfaction of the Japanese produced matcha tea I was used to (I had to stock up whenever I’d travel home and share my matcha with friends who desperate for the real thing.)

There are several highly reputed growing regions across Japan, including Shizuoka, Uji, and Kagoshima. For me, the importance of knowing the source farm location and having relationships with the growers comes from knowing that the Japanese producers SAYURI have contract fields with are reliable, family owned for generations, and adhere to the traditional matcha growing, harvesting, and processing methods.

Japan has prime soil conditions in its volcanic regions, naturally soft water, has rigorous quality control measures in place, and has produced tea with the highest nutrient values compared to other tea-growing countries. SAYURI farmers are artisans and pride history, flavour, and quality.

4. Pick your flavour (hint, it shouldn’t be bitter!)

Taste and smell are equally important indicators of a quality matcha. You should be able to enjoy a natural round sweetness due to a higher concentration of L-theanine, which also creates a savoury taste known as ‘umami’.

Of course, products will vary a little in terms of the balance of umami, sweetness, and bitterness flavour profiles. But your matcha should always be pleasant to drink with a fresh and grassy aroma. There should be little bitterness and no harsh robustness that lower grade matcha often has.

5. Consider the process

Purity and traceability are important for a quality matcha, as are the harvesting and grinding processes. Once the tea leaves are ready for harvest, they can be picked by hand or machine, then steamed and dried. The leaves are then sorted by grade, with the best ones selected for ceremonial grade matcha products. The final step is stone-grinding the leaves into a super fine powder.

If the texture of your matcha is gritty, there is a chance it may be a lower quality matcha that was ground by machine. Grinding that is too harsh or that creates too much heat will actually burn the tea leaves and increase its oxidation, resulting in low-grade matcha, regardless of its initial harvest. How can you tell if it's been ground correctly? Incorrectly ground matcha won't taste as creamy and smooth as slow, stone ground matcha.

Of course, these time and labour-intensive methods can also often mean a higher price point. Sadly, if your matcha was super cheap, chances are it's not genuine matcha as the correct processes may have been accelerated or even skipped. In saying that, some companies simply charge higher, hoping that consumers will think their product is premium. The best way to know is to trust the brand you purchase off.

About Sayuri

SAYURI, a mission-driven brand honouring Japanese traditions and promoting the health benefits of a daily tea ritual. SAYURI makes a collection of authentic, traceable, organic green teas and matcha's accessible to a modern, global audience, while supporting the artisans of Japan who struggle to compete in this digital era.

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