Sencha vs Gyokuro vs Bancha

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Sencha vs gyokuro vs bancha, in summary:** Sencha vs gyokuro vs bancha: how shade and harvest set character, caffeine and brew temperature across the three pillars of Japanese green tea.

Our sencha guide hints at the wider Japanese green family; this page sets the three pillars side by side, because once you understand shade and harvest you understand most Japanese green tea.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in February 2026.

Sencha: the everyday standard

Sencha is grown in full sun and is the tea most Japanese people drink daily. It is brisk, grassy and lightly astringent with a clean finish, and it makes up the large majority of Japanese green tea production. If you have had "Japanese green tea", it was almost certainly sencha. First flush spring sencha (see shincha) is the prized version, sweeter and more aromatic than later pickings.

Gyokuro: the shaded luxury

Gyokuro is shaded for around three weeks before harvest. Starving the leaf of light pushes it to produce more chlorophyll and more L theanine and fewer of the catechins that cause astringency. The result is a deep green, intensely savoury, almost broth like tea with a sweetness and umami that sencha does not reach. It is brewed cool and slow, and it is priced accordingly. The same shading principle is exactly what makes matcha what it is, and why both carry more caffeine than a sun grown leaf, as the matcha versus green tea comparison explains.

Bancha: the humble everyday

Bancha is made from later harvests and more mature leaves, often the same gardens as sencha but a coarser, lower caffeine, more mellow tea. It is the relaxed evening counterpart to sencha, gentle, slightly woody and very easy drinking, and it is the base of hojicha when roasted.

Side by side

	Sencha	Gyokuro	Bancha

Growing	Full sun	Shaded ~3 weeks	Later, mature leaf
Character	Brisk, grassy, clean	Deep, savoury, umami	Mellow, woody, gentle
Caffeine	Medium	Highest	Lowest
Brew temp	70 to 80 C	50 to 60 C	Near boiling fine
Best time	Daytime	Morning, savour slowly	Evening

How to choose

Want a daily green with brightness and a bit of bite: sencha. Want a slow, savoury, special cup and you will brew it carefully: gyokuro. Want something low caffeine and gentle for the evening: bancha. They reward different water temperatures, cooler and more patient as you move from bancha to gyokuro, which our green tea brewing guide covers in detail.

Brewing each one

The rule is simple: the finer and more shaded the tea, the cooler and more patient the brew. Sencha: about 70 to 80 C, one to one and a half minutes. Gyokuro: cooler still, around 50 to 60 C, two minutes or more, using more leaf and less water for a concentrated savoury cup. Bancha: this one is forgiving, near boiling is fine, one to two minutes. Boiling water on gyokuro in particular wastes an expensive tea by scorching out exactly the sweetness you paid for, the single most common reason a first gyokuro disappoints. The general logic of heat against delicacy is set out in the water temperature guide.

Caffeine and when to drink them

Shading raises caffeine, so gyokuro is the strongest of the three, sencha sits in the middle, and bancha is the lowest because it is made from older leaves. That maps neatly onto the day: gyokuro or sencha in the morning and early afternoon, bancha in the evening when you want the cup without the lift. It is the same logic as choosing a decaf later in the day, just within the Japanese green family.

Common questions

Is gyokuro just expensive sencha? No. The weeks of shading change the chemistry, not just the price, building umami and sweetness sencha never reaches.

Can I brew gyokuro like sencha? You can, but you will throw away most of what makes it gyokuro. Cooler and slower is the whole point.

Is bancha low quality? No, it is a different intention: mellow, low caffeine, easy. Judge it as an evening tea, not a weak sencha.

Which is best value? Sencha for daily drinking, comfortably. Gyokuro is a deliberate treat; bancha is the cheap, gentle staple.

Grades and what to look for when buying

Within each of these names there is a wide quality range, and a few concrete signals beat any marketing adjective. Colour is the clearest: vivid, bright green points to fresher, better handled leaf, while dull yellow or

khaki points to age, heat damage or stem content whatever the tin says. A stated harvest year or best before date matters more than the word "premium", because this family fades fast and a modest fresh tea routinely beats an expensive stale one. For sencha, look for a clean grassy smell and unbroken needle like leaf; for gyokuro, a deep colour and a heavy, savoury aroma; for bancha, larger leaf and a gentle, slightly woody scent are normal and not a fault. Spend on freshness and provenance rather than on the most flattering label.

Get more from the leaf: multiple infusions

One of the most common mistakes with all three is treating them like a teabag and discarding the leaf after a single steep, which throws away most of what you paid for. Sencha and gyokuro in particular reward a second and often third infusion, each one slightly shorter and a touch hotter than the last, revealing different notes as the leaf opens. Gyokuro especially is designed for this: the first tiny, cool, concentrated steep is almost a savoury broth, and the later steeps relax into something lighter and sweeter. Bancha is more of a one pot, all day tea but still gives a comfortable second steep. Built into the cost per cup, this makes a good Japanese green far better value than it first appears, and it is the main reason loose leaf beats dust grade bags here.

Where hojicha and genmaicha fit

The family does not stop at these three. Roast bancha and you get hojicha, nutty, toasty, very low in caffeine and an excellent evening cup for anyone who finds even bancha too lively at night. Blend bancha or sencha with roasted rice and you get genmaicha, savoury and comforting and a gentle entry point for people who find straight green tea too austere. Both sit on the same shade and harvest axis as sencha, gyokuro and bancha; they are simply two more settings, one defined by roasting and one by the rice, and they slot neatly onto the map once the core three make sense.

The short version

One plant, three teas, separated by how much sun the leaf saw and how old it was when picked. Shade builds sweetness, umami and caffeine; sun and age build briskness and ease. Learn that axis and Japanese green tea stops being a wall of unfamiliar names. If you want to taste it properly, browse sencha, gyokuro and the wider Japanese green range at teas.co.uk, or the full tea shop. Pick among the three by cup and description, then look at the price of a single brew; UK delivery is free past £35.

Related on the wiki: Gyokuro, Explained.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Judge each Japanese green in the cup rather than by its label. The wider Japanese shelf can follow once you know your favourite.

Tea reading

- The history of tea
- Loose leaf vs teabag
- Tea tasting for beginners
- Tea and caffeine
- Herbal tea
- Green tea
- Tea storage
- Tea ethics and sustainability

More from the tea wiki

- Green tea
- Black tea
- Oolong tea
- White tea
- Herbal tea
- Caffeine in tea
- How to make tea properly
- Loose leaf vs teabag

Earn rewards on teas.co.uk

Earn loyalty points on every order. Free to join.

+100 pts

Create your free account

Welcome bonus + earn on every order.



100 pts = 1 tree

Plant a tree in Scotland

Pledge points to our reforestation partner.



teas.co.uk · Tunbridge Wells, Kent · hello@teas.co.uk · 3-click cancel at teas.co.uk/cancel/