Tea in Japan: From Monks to the Tea Ceremony

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Japanese tea history, in summary:** A UK guide to Japanese tea history: Buddhist monastic origins, Eisai and matcha, Sen no Rikyu and chanoyu, modern tea types.

Japan received tea from China and turned it into something distinctive: a spiritual and aesthetic discipline centred on matcha and the tea ceremony. This sits in the history cluster beside tea in China.

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

Arrival via Buddhism

Tea came to Japan with Buddhist monks returning from China, used initially to aid meditation, an origin that shaped its later spiritual character.

Eisai and matcha

The monk Eisai promoted whisked powdered tea (the matcha lineage) and its benefits, embedding tea in Zen practice, see what is matcha.

The way of tea

Over centuries Japan developed chanoyu, the tea ceremony, refined by figures like Sen no Rikyu into an art of hospitality, simplicity and presence, not just a drink, see the Japanese tea ceremony.

Aesthetics and philosophy

Concepts of wabi sabi, restraint and mindful attention run through Japanese tea, making it a cultural and philosophical practice distinct from Chinese tea culture.

Japanese tea types

Japan specialised in steamed green teas, sencha, gyokuro, matcha, houjicha, with shading and processing techniques behind their umami character, see umami in tea.

Modern legacy

The ceremony endures, and matcha has become a global phenomenon, carrying Japanese tea culture far beyond Japan, see matcha vs green tea.

Bottom line

Japan took Chinese tea and made it a spiritual art, monks, matcha, Zen and the ceremony, a culture as much as a drink, see the history of tea.

Quick reference: Tea in Japan

Period	What happened
9th century	Buddhist monks (Saicho, Kukai) bring Chinese tea seeds and powdered tea practice to Japan
12th century (1191)	Eisai reintroduces tea seeds from China; writes Kissa Yojoki promoting tea for health and longevity
15th-16th centuries	Sen no Rikyu develops chanoyu (the formal tea ceremony) reaching its mature form under daimyo patronage
Edo period (1603-1868)	Sencha (loose-leaf brewed tea) develops alongside matcha; tea drinking spreads beyond elite samurai class
Modern era	Japan develops distinctive shade-growing techniques producing gyokuro and matcha at industrial scale; sencha becomes the dominant Japanese daily tea
Major Japanese tea types	Matcha (powdered shade-grown), gyokuro (shade-grown loose-leaf), sencha (everyday loose-leaf), genmaicha (with roasted rice), hojicha (roasted)
Cultural role	Tea ceremony (chanoyu) is one of the most formalised cultural arts in any tea-drinking country

Taste Japanese tea

To explore Japanese tea, try ceremonial matcha, everyday sencha, shade-grown gyokuro for umami, or roasted hojicha and nutty genmaicha. Browse the wider green tea range or the full tea shop.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (history)

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More tea history reading

For specific Japanese teas see what is matcha, the sencha guide and umami in tea. For Chinese roots see tea in China. For ceremony context see tea ceremonies around the world. For green tea fundamentals see the green tea overview.

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