Tea With Sushi and Japanese Food: Why Green Wins

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea with sushi, in summary:** A UK guide to tea with sushi: sencha for everyday, gyokuro for premium, houjicha for tempura. Why green tea works mechanically with Japanese food.

Green tea with sushi is not just tradition, it is one of the most mechanically sound pairings there is. This sits in the pairing cluster beside what to eat with green tea.

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

Why green tea wins

Green tea is light, fresh, low in astringency and often faintly marine, exactly the register of sushi, so it complements the fish rather than competing with it. It is also one of the most mechanically sound pairings in any cuisine, for three reasons the sections below unpack: it matches the weight of delicate fish, it echoes the natural umami of fresh fish, and it cleanses the palate between pieces without leaving a flavour footprint. Japanese restaurants have poured green tea with sushi for centuries not out of habit but because it is simply the right tool for the task.

Japanese pairings at a glance

Japanese dish	Best tea pairing
Sushi (variety nigiri and maki)	Sencha or genmaicha; light umami, palate-cleansing
Sashimi (raw fish, no rice)	Gyokuro or sencha; preserves the delicate marine flavour
Premium sushi omakase	Gyokuro (shade-grown, umami-rich); for special occasions
Casual conveyor-belt sushi	Bancha or houjicha (cheap, abundant, palate-cleansing)
Tempura	Houjicha (roasted, low caffeine); cleanses oil without astringency
Ramen (rich broth)	Genmaicha or houjicha; toasty notes match the broth
Udon or soba noodles	Bancha or sencha; cleansing, light
Yakitori or grilled meat	Houjicha; roasted-on-roasted echo
Sukiyaki (sweet soy hot pot)	Genmaicha or bancha; balances the sweetness
Japanese sweets (wagashi, mochi)	Matcha (whisked or ceremonial); traditional pairing

Japanese dish	Best tea pairing
Curry rice (Japanese style)	Houjicha or barley tea (mugicha); roasted balance

The umami resonance

Umami, the savoury fifth taste, was identified by the Japanese chemist Kikunae Ikeda in 1908 from konbu seaweed broth. Fresh fish, especially fatty tuna, salmon and mackerel, carry it strongly, and so does shade-grown green tea: covering the bushes before harvest raises the amino acid L-theanine, the source of the leaf's savoury depth. Pair sushi with a shaded green like gyokuro or top sencha and the two umami sources amplify each other, producing a deeper savoury experience than either alone. This is the echo mechanism applied to one specific flavour dimension, and it is among the most elegant pairings going. See umami in tea .

Cleansing the palate

A sushi meal runs piece by piece, often across a dozen or more fish and rolls. Without something to reset the mouth, the flavours blur and the seventh piece reads as less distinct than the third. Warm green tea between bites rinses the palate and resets the baseline, so the next piece tastes as clean as the first. It is the same job the pickled ginger does, working at the scale of the whole meal rather than just between neighbours. That is why a pot stays on the table throughout, not only at the start or end.

Which green tea

Several Japanese greens suit sushi, each with its own optimisation. Sencha, the steamed daily-drinking green, is the everyday default: grassy, lightly sweet, reliably cleansing. Genmaicha, sencha blended with toasted brown rice, adds a toasty note that echoes the rice in sushi and is very food-friendly. Houjicha, roasted and lower in caffeine, suits evening sushi when you want less of a lift. Gyokuro, shade-grown and intensely savoury, is the special-occasion choice for premium sashimi. Matcha belongs with wagashi sweets rather than sushi itself. See sencha versus gyokuro.

Brewing it right

Japanese green tea is fussier about temperature than the black tea most British drinkers know. Boiling water scorches it, drawing out bitterness and destroying the L-theanine that carries the umami. Match the heat to the leaf: sencha at 70 to 80C, gyokuro cooler still at 50 to 60C (almost lukewarm), houjicha and bancha at 85 to 95C, genmaicha around 80 to 85C. Steep one to two minutes for sencha and genmaicha, two for gyokuro, well under a minute for houjicha. Use a little more leaf and a shorter steep rather than the reverse, which only turns it bitter. Restaurants pre-brew in a warm pot, so the temperature is managed for you.

Gyokuro for special occasions

Gyokuro is the premium shade-grown green, several times the price of sencha but worth it for a special sashimi or omakase. The bushes are covered for three to four weeks before harvest, which lifts L-theanine and chlorophyll while lowering catechins, giving an intensely savoury, dark-green, almost broth-like cup with very little astringency. Brewed properly (50 to 60C, two minutes, good leaf) it reads more like a savoury

stock than a typical tea, and against premium raw fish it produces about the deepest umami experience available in either Japanese cuisine or tea drinking. This is genuine high-end gastronomy, not a gimmick.

Why black tea fails

Black tea is the wrong tool here, for three reasons. Its strong tannins clash with delicate fish, giving a bitter-marine combination most people dislike. Its heavier body bulldozes the lightness sushi depends on, so the fish disappears. And standard black tea has no umami to offer, missing the resonance that makes the green pairing sing. Sushi is not rich enough to need cutting, so this is a match-down pairing (light food, light tea), and black sits too far up the intensity scale. The British reflex of black tea with everything reliably fails against Japanese food. See the pairing chart.

Beyond sushi

The light-tea-with-light-food principle runs across most of the cuisine. Sashimi, tempura (with houjicha for the oil), udon, soba, ramen, yakitori and sukiyaki all sit happily with a Japanese green or roasted green. The few exceptions are where tradition uses something else: matcha with wagashi sweets, barley tea (mugicha) with curry rice. The pattern holds because Japanese food and Japanese tea were refined by the same culture in step. Eating Japanese, default to Japanese tea and you will rarely be wrong. See what to eat with green tea.

What to buy for sushi pairing

For everyday sushi pairing buy sencha green tea, genmaicha (rice-toasted green), or bancha. For premium sushi or sashimi buy gyokuro (shade-grown green tea) or Japanese green tea premium. For Japanese tempura and grilled dishes buy houjicha (roasted green). For Japanese sweets buy matcha. For a simple all-rounder buy green tea generally.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Per-cup price is the only price that matters. Loose leaf usually wins; supermarket bags sometimes do too.

More tea reading

For the broader pairing framework see the tea pairing chart. For specific Japanese teas see the green tea reference, sencha versus gyokuro, genmaicha, houjicha and matcha. For the savoury dimension see umami in tea, and for broader green-tea food pairings what to eat with green tea.

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/