Samidori: Uji's Umami Cultivar for Gyokuro and Matcha

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Samidori cultivar, in summary:** A Japanese green-tea cultivar selected in Uji for premium gyokuro and matcha, exceptionally responsive to pre-harvest shading, which gives it a deep, sweet umami character.

Samidori is a connoisseur favourite behind some fine matcha and gyokuro. This sits in the cultivar cluster beside okumidori.

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What Samidori is

Samidori is a Japanese green-tea cultivar selected in the Uji region of Kyoto in the mid-twentieth century, associated above all with high-grade shaded teas: premium gyokuro, matcha and kabusecha. It is valued for a soft, sweet, umami-rich profile with low bitterness and a bright green colour when shade-grown, a refined rather than brisk character. Single-cultivar Samidori matcha is sought out as a contrast to the Yabukita baseline, and it is one of the connoisseur-recognised marks of top-tier Japanese green tea. See matcha for the powdered side and Uji tea for the place.

Aspect	Note
Name	Samidori, Japanese green-tea cultivar
Origin	Selected in Uji, Kyoto, mid-20th century
Used for	Premium gyokuro, premium matcha, premium kabusecha
Distinguishing trait	Umami depth and bright green colour under shading
Famous use	Top-tier Uji gyokuro and Uji matcha
Shading interaction	Responds exceptionally well to pre-harvest shading; deeper umami
Caveat	Cultivar alone is not the whole story; producer + shading matter equally
Buying signal	Premium Uji matcha or gyokuro with named Samidori cultivar

Why shading matters

The reason Samidori sits at the top of the Japanese green-tea hierarchy is its exceptional response to pre-harvest shading. In the Japanese technique (kabuse for kabusecha, ooishita for gyokuro and tencha for matcha), canopy cloth or reed mats cover the bushes for 7 to 30 days before harvest, cutting sunlight to 10 to 30% of normal. That triggers the plant to produce more chlorophyll (the deep green), more theanine (the umami amino acid), and less catechin tannin (so less astringency). Samidori is unusually responsive: under a 20-day ooishita regime it can carry theanine 30 to 50% above the unshaded baseline, with a deeper green and a more umami-forward profile than other cultivars reach at the same shading. That is the single biggest reason it is the premium-tier choice for top-grade gyokuro and matcha in Uji.

Samidori vs other Japanese cultivars

Each major Japanese cultivar suits a different use. Yabukita is the workhorse behind roughly 70% of Japanese tea acreage, a well-balanced everyday sencha and mid-tier gyokuro. Okumidori is the matcha specialist, giving the brightest green colour and a sweet, grassy character that suits matcha. Samidori is the premium-gyokuro specialist, producing the deepest umami under heavy shading and the most celebrated top-tier Uji gyokuro and ceremonial matcha. Asahi and Goko are the rare, expensive ceremonial-matcha cultivars, exquisitely sweet but seldom seen outside Japan. In short: for the deep-umami Uji experience, look for Samidori; for everyday Japanese green, Yabukita is exactly right.

How to brew Samidori gyokuro

Samidori-grade gyokuro only gives up its umami at the right temperature and time, so the method differs from ordinary brewing. Use a small 80 to 150ml kyusu (Japanese side-handle teapot) or a porcelain gaiwan, since a large mug dilutes the umami beyond perception. Keep the water at 50 to 60C, nowhere near boiling, by resting just-boiled water for 5 to 7 minutes or cooling it through a second cup first; full-boil water scorches the leaf and destroys the umami. Use a generous 5 to 8g of leaf per 100ml, a much higher ratio than sencha, and steep the first infusion for 90 to 120 seconds, because the low temperature needs the extra time. Serve small, 30 to 50ml a cup, sipped slowly to register the thick mouthfeel, and expect 3 to 5 productive steeps. A proper kyusu earns its place here.

The cultivar caveat

The cultivar is a meaningful signal, but it is not the whole story. The producer matters just as much, since a careless processor can waste a Samidori pluck and a Uji master can coax deep umami even from other cultivars. The shading regime matters: Samidori under a short 7-day kabuse is a different cup from Samidori under 20-day ooishita, and the top-tier gyokuro experience needs the longer, costlier shading. Harvest timing matters, with spring first-flush at the peak. And grade matters, from konacha (broken leaf) up through aracha to top tencha and gyokuro-grade leaf. So the strongest label names the full chain: Samidori cultivar, Uji origin, a named producer, the shading length, first-flush, and the grade. Without that substance, the Samidori claim alone signals less than it could. See how to judge tea quality.

Reference noted

- PubMed: L-theanine and attention (clinical trial)

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