Shincha: Japan's First Tea of the Year

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Shincha, in summary:** Shincha is "new tea", the first sencha of the year, rushed to market for its fleeting freshness. It is a once-a-year seasonal pleasure: buy a small amount in the May to July window, brew it cool at 65 to 75C, and drink it soon.

Shincha is the Japanese green tea that arrives with the most excitement and the most seasonal marketing, so it deserves the clearest, least excitable explanation. Shincha simply means "new tea": it is the very first sencha-style tea of the year, made from the first spring flush and sold as fast as possible after harvest. It is not a different plant or a separate type; it is sencha at its freshest possible moment, and almost everything special, and everything overstated, about it follows from that.

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

What shincha actually is

Through winter the tea plant stores nutrients in its roots, so the first spring leaves are the chemically richest of the year: unusually high in the sweet amino acid L-theanine and in chlorophyll, and proportionally lower in the bitter catechins that build up in later harvests. Shincha is made from that first flush and rushed to market, traditionally a celebrated, almost festival-like seasonal event in Japan. The cup is strikingly fresh, vivid, sweet and lively with a bright vegetal, marine aroma, a kind of concentrated "first taste of spring". Later in the year the same gardens make ordinary sencha, and progressively more astringent second and third harvests; shincha is simply that leaf caught at its youngest and freshest, which is why drinkers who taste shincha and standard sencha side by side notice a real difference.

The 88-day tradition

Shincha sits inside a piece of calendar folklore worth knowing. The Japanese calendar marks risshun, the traditional start of spring (around 4 February), as a zero point, and the prized leaf is harvested on or around the 88th day after it, which falls in early to mid May depending on region. Tradition holds that 88th day tea brings good fortune and long life; the evidence on the long life side is modest, but first flush leaf really is richer in aroma and amino acids than later harvests, so the custom has real substance behind the romance. Timing varies by region: Kagoshima in the south picks earliest, Uji and Shizuoka a few weeks later, the north into late May or June, so the 88-day rule is a guideline rather than a strict deadline.

Special, but watch the hype

The split matters. It is true that first flush leaf is naturally sweeter and more aromatic, and that drinking it within weeks of harvest captures a freshness that fades over the year, so the excitement is not pure marketing. Where it overreaches is in implying shincha is a different, healthier category, or that "freshest" automatically means "best for everyone". Some drinkers actually prefer the more rounded character of settled sencha; shincha can be delicate and fleeting. The fair framing is that shincha is a special seasonal pleasure and a real freshness peak, not a superior species or a health upgrade.

The freshness rule, and how to brew it

Shincha makes the general green-tea freshness rule vivid: it is at its best soon and does not improve with keeping, so buying it and leaving it in the cupboard for months defeats the entire point, by which time it is just ordinary, slightly stale sencha. Buy a modest amount and drink it while it is what you paid for. To brew, treat it as the delicate first-flush sencha it is: water well off the boil at around 65 to 75C (cooler even than ordinary sencha), roughly 5 to 6g of leaf per 150ml, and a short first steep of 60 to 90 seconds, then quicker re-steeps. Its sweetness and bright aroma are precisely what boiling water destroys. The first infusion is the celebrated one, and drinking it without milk or sugar is the only way to taste why people anticipate it each year.

Shincha and first-flush Darjeeling

Shincha's closest cousin in spirit is first-flush Darjeeling, and comparing them is illuminating. Both are first-harvest spring leaf at the aromatic peak of their year, both are limited seasonal pleasures (shincha around May to July, Darjeeling first flush around March to April), and both sit in the premium tier. The difference is processing: shincha is steamed-green, giving a bright vegetal-umami cup brewed cool and short, while first-flush Darjeeling is lightly oxidised, giving a honey-floral, almost champagne-like cup brewed a little hotter and longer. Shincha suits Japanese food and light dishes; the Darjeeling suits a Western breakfast. Tasting both back to back shows how the "first flush" idea expresses itself across two very different traditions, as the first-flush Darjeeling range demonstrates.

Is shincha good for you

Shincha is true green tea, offering caffeine, catechins and L theanine, and no miracle. First-flush leaf is naturally a little richer in L-theanine, which is a fair, modest, real point and not a special health claim. The real value of shincha is taste and season, the brief, lovely freshness of the year's first tea, and that needs no invented extras.

Shincha at a glance

Aspect	Note
Best UK window	Mid-May to early July; buy fresh when available
Freshness life	Drink within about 3 months of opening; do not age it
Brewing water	65 to 75C; cooler than ordinary sencha
Leaf load	5 to 6g per 150ml; a higher leaf-to-water ratio than usual
Steep time	60 to 90 seconds first; shorter on later steeps

Aspect	Note
Pricing tier	Premium; roughly £18 to £30 per 100g
The read	A worth-it once-a-year seasonal pleasure, not an everyday tea

Treat shincha as a once a year pleasure: catch it in season, store it cold and airtight if you must hold it briefly, brew it cool and short, and drink it fresh. The companion sencha and Japanese green tea guides cover the wider family, and you can source it in season from the green tea range, the brand directory, or the full tea shop.

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