The Kyusu: Japan's Side Handled Green Tea Pot

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **The kyusu, in summary:** Japan's side-handled green-tea pot, and a rare case of tea kit that is pure function, not mystique. The side handle, low wide body, small volume and built-in fine mesh all exist to brew sencha and gyokuro well.

The kyusu is the classic Japanese teapot, and the most useful fact is that, unlike most "special" tea kit, its design is functional rather than decorative: nearly every feature, the side handle, the wide low body, the built in fine filter, exists to brew delicate Japanese green tea well. It is a tool shaped by the tea it serves, and understanding that explains both its use and its care.

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

What a kyusu actually is

A kyusu is a small teapot, typically 150 to 350ml, with an integral fine filter built into the spout side and, in its most recognisable form, a hollow handle projecting from the side rather than a loop on top or back. That side-handled form is the yokode kyusu, by far the most common; a back-handled ushirode and a top-handled uwade also exist but are mostly seen in specialist or ceremony use. It is made of clay or porcelain, the prestige clays being tokoname-yaki from Aichi and banko-yaki from Mie, and the built-in filter may be a ceramic mesh, a metal screen or a band of tiny holes. It is designed for several short infusions of leaf, not one big brew, which matches exactly how good Japanese green tea is made.

Why the design genuinely works

The functional core is that every feature answers the demands of Japanese green tea. The side handle gives precise, controlled pouring and lets you stop instantly, which matters for short, repeated steeps where a few seconds too long means bitterness. The wide, low body lets fine sencha and gyokuro leaf open and circulate in a shallow bath of cooler water. The small volume keeps the leaf-to-water ratio right for the small servings Japanese tea is brewed in. The built-in fine mesh is essential because Japanese green leaf is often small or broken and would pour straight through a coarse strainer. And the iron-rich unglazed clay is said to interact gently with the tea's tannins to mellow astringency, a subtle flavour effect rather than a health one. None of this is ornament: it is a pot engineered around the temperature, time and leaf of Japanese green, which is why it shines there and is largely beside the point for strong black tea.

How to use it well

Use it as intended. Pre-heat the pot with warm water and discard it, add a generous measure of leaf, then brew with water well off the boil, around 70 to 80C for sencha and cooler still, 50 to 60C, for premium gyokuro. Steep short, roughly 60 to 90 seconds for sencha and up to two minutes for gyokuro, then pour out completely, to the last drop, alternating between cups so they finish at equal strength, because any liquor left sitting on the leaves over-extracts the next infusion. Re-infuse with slightly hotter water and a shorter steep: a good sencha gives two or three satisfying infusions, gyokuro often three or four. The side handle is what makes that controlled, complete pour easy, which is the whole point, and a kyusu is wasted on a single long Western-style brew.

How to clean and care for it

Maintenance is simple. Rinse with water only, especially for unglazed clay, which absorbs soap and odours exactly as Yixing does, so detergent is out. The one part that needs attention is the built-in filter, since fine Japanese leaf clogs it; backwash it gently under running water until it clears, as a blocked mesh is the commonest practical complaint and a cleaning issue rather than a fault. Air-dry fully with the lid off, and pre-heat the pot with warm water before adding hot brew water, particularly in cold weather, since sudden temperature shifts can crack clay over time. A well-used kyusu develops a faint tea patina inside and a softer sheen outside; both are good signs, not stains. Clay kyusu are best loosely kept to one tea family and are more fragile than porcelain, while glazed or porcelain versions are more forgiving for general green-tea use.

Is it worth it?

A kyusu is one of the few pieces of tea equipment that really earns its special status. If you drink Japanese green tea it materially improves control and the cup, and even an inexpensive porcelain one does the job, with a respectable everyday tokoname or banko pot costing roughly £25 to £50 and lasting a lifetime; handmade pots from named potters run far higher and are real craft objects to buy knowingly. It is not needed for strong black tea or for one pot mug brewing, and a standard glazed teapot with a good strainer covers the basics. What to avoid is the cheapest sub-£15 "kyusu", where the mesh and proportions are usually wrong, the oversized novelty pot that defeats the point of small servings, and the decorative-only model with a weak handle or non-functional spout. Buy a simple, well-made one, use it for green tea the way it was designed for, keep soap off clay versions, and enjoy a rare case of tea kit that is function, not mystique.

The kyusu at a glance

Question	Answer
What is it?	A small Japanese side-handled teapot for premium green tea like sencha and gyokuro.
How big?	Typically 150 to 350ml; built for one to three small cups at a time.
Why a side handle?	Precise, low-angle pour control for short, repeated infusions.
What is it made of?	Traditionally tokoname or banko iron-rich clay; glazed and porcelain versions also exist.

Question	Answer
What's the built-in mesh?	An integral fine filter for small Japanese leaf that would block an ordinary strainer.
How do I care for it?	Rinse with hot water only, no soap; backwash the mesh; dry upside down; pre-heat before brewing.
Cost?	About £25 to £50 for a good everyday pot; more for a potter's handmade work. Avoid sub-£15.

A kyusu earns its keep with Japanese green, so pair it with sencha or a shade-grown gyokuro from the full tea shop, where kyusu friendly greens ship free in the UK over £35.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Pottery

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