Genmaicha: Toasted Rice Green Tea, Explained

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Genmaicha, in summary:** Genmaicha is the savoury "popcorn tea": green tea with toasted rice, comforting, nutty, lower caffeine. The concise practical position and how to brew it.

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

Genmaicha is the Japanese green tea blended with toasted brown rice, sometimes called "popcorn tea" because the rice puffs up during processing and releases an aroma reminiscent of cinema popcorn. The cup is savoury sweet, lower in caffeine than typical green tea, and one of the most accessible introductions to Japanese tea for drinkers who find pure sencha too vegetal.

The history

Genmaicha originated as a thrifty everyday tea, adding cheap toasted rice (genmai) to expensive green tea (cha) extended the supply for poorer households. Modern genmaicha is no longer a poverty tea, it's drunk widely across Japan as a daily standard, valued for its distinctive savoury character.

The name breaks down as:

- *Gen* (?), referring to genmai (brown rice)
- *Mai* (?), rice
- *Cha* (?), tea

What's in genmaicha

Standard genmaicha is roughly:

- 50% green tea (typically bancha or sencha, the everyday Japanese green grades)
- 50% roasted brown rice (genmai)

The rice is steamed, dried, then roasted (often in a hot pan) until it puffs and turns golden brown. Some genmaicha includes "popcorn", visible puffed rice grains, while in lower grade versions the rice is unpuffed.

Matcha iri genmaicha

A premium variant where matcha powder is added to standard genmaicha. The cup is greener, richer, with the matcha umami amplifying the savoury rice character. Higher end Japanese tea retailers offer this version.

What it tastes like

Savoury sweet, a unique flavour profile. The roasted rice contributes:

- Toasty, popcorn like aromatic
- Slight nuttiness
- Sweetness (Maillard reaction during roasting)

Combined with the green tea base, the cup is recognisably Japanese green tea with a distinctive grain character. Less astringent than pure sencha; more substantial than plain bancha.

Why "popcorn tea"

Brewed properly, genmaicha smells remarkably like a cinema lobby, buttered popcorn, toasted grain, slight savoury depth. The aroma is one of the cup's defining pleasures. Open the dry leaves and the smell is instantly recognisable.

Caffeine, lower than typical green tea

Because genmaicha is roughly half rice (which is caffeine free), the cup contains LESS caffeine per 200ml than pure green tea:

- **Standard sencha:** 30-40mg per cup
- **Genmaicha:** 15-25mg per cup
- **Bancha (lower grade green):** 20-30mg per cup

This makes genmaicha a good afternoon friendly green tea, gentler on caffeine, suitable for late afternoon drinking without disrupting sleep.

How to brew

1. 1 tea bag or 1 heaped tsp loose per 200ml.
2. Water at 80-85°C, slightly higher than premium sencha, slightly lower than full boil. The rice tolerates more heat than delicate green leaves.
3. Steep 1-2 minutes ONLY. Genmaicha extracts faster than other green teas.
4. Strain. Drink black, no additions needed.
5. Loose leaf genmaicha can be re steeped 2-3 times. Each subsequent steep is slightly different in character.

When to drink genmaicha

- **Afternoon, post lunch.** The savoury character pairs with most lunch foods.
- **Late afternoon.** Lower caffeine than typical green tea makes this drinkable later in the day.
- **With Japanese food.** Sushi, soba, tempura, all pair beautifully with genmaicha.
- **As a green tea introduction.** Easier on first time green tea drinkers than pure sencha.
- **With salty snacks.** The savoury character suits it.

Cooking with genmaicha

The toasted grain character lends itself to cooking:

- Use brewed genmaicha as the cooking liquid for Japanese rice (instead of water) for added depth.
- Genmaicha poached fish (white fish especially), light, savoury, distinctive.
- Genmaicha used in dashi style broths.
- Cold brewed genmaicha as a non alcoholic accompaniment to Japanese meals.

More on cooking with tea.

Buying genmaicha in the UK

- **Yamamotoyama Genmaicha.** Japanese brand, widely available in UK Asian groceries and online specialty retailers.
- **Clearspring Organic Genmaicha.** UK organic specialist; high quality version.
- **Mei Leaf Genmaicha.** Premium loose leaf option.
- **Whittard Genmaicha.** UK specialty brand.
- **Asian groceries (London, Birmingham, Manchester).** Often best value for everyday genmaicha.

Storage

Like all green teas, genmaicha benefits from airtight, cool, dark storage. The roasted rice is stable; the green tea component degrades faster. Best within 6-12 months of opening.

FAQ

Why does genmaicha smell like popcorn? The toasted brown rice releases popcorn like aromatic compounds during roasting and brewing. A real aroma match, not just marketing.

Does genmaicha have less caffeine? Yes, roughly 50-60% the caffeine of pure sencha because half the bag is rice (caffeine free).

How do I brew genmaicha properly? 80-85°C water, 1-2 minutes steep. Don't oversteep, bitterness develops fast.

Can I drink it iced? Yes, cold brewed genmaicha is excellent. The savoury sweet character translates beautifully cold. More on cold brew.

Best genmaicha brand UK? Yamamotoyama for accessible Japanese brand option. Clearspring for organic. Specialist UK retailers for premium loose.

Curator's note: genmaicha is the green tea most likely to convert a non green tea drinker. The rice character sits between Western "tea should be familiar" and Japanese "tea should be distinctly itself." Worth keeping in the cupboard for afternoon drinking. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Genmaicha, the practical summary

Question	The answer
What it is	Green tea + toasted/popped rice; "popcorn tea"
Taste	Savoury, nutty, toasty, low bitterness
Caffeine	Lower than most green, but not none
Best for	Everyday drinking, savoury food, gentle on the stomach
Brew	Off the boil, short, re-steep

Buy a good genmaicha in the green tea range, compare a sencha, or browse the full tea shop.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Begin cheap with genmaicha until something stops you. Most rich teas reward patience, not budget.

Japanese green reading

- Genmaicha: the full reference
- Genmaicha in the roasted cluster
- green tea explained
- Hojicha explained

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