Japanese Tea Explained: The Types, Regions and Brewing

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Japanese tea, in summary:** Japanese tea is almost entirely steam-fixed green tea with a unique umami: sencha, gyokuro, matcha, hojicha and genmaicha, with regions and brewing.

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

Japanese tea is one of the world's great tea traditions, almost entirely green tea, defined by steam fixed processing rather than pan firing, with intense umami character that no other tea tradition replicates. Sencha, gyokuro, matcha, hojicha, genmaicha, each with distinct character and use case. This is the working overview.

The defining feature: steam fixing

Where Chinese green tea is pan fired, Japanese green tea is steamed. The brief intense steam (10-30 seconds at ~100°C) deactivates oxidation enzymes while preserving the bright vivid green colour and the marine vegetal umami character that defines Japanese tea.

The major Japanese green tea types

Sencha (??)

The everyday Japanese green. Steamed, rolled into thin needle shapes. Vivid green colour, vegetal umami flavour, slight marine notes. Around 60-70% of Japanese tea production. Premium grades are first flush spring tea; standard grades are everyday drinking.

Gyokuro (??, "jewel dew")

Premium shaded sencha. Tea plants covered for 20-30 days before harvest, increasing L theanine and reducing catechin formation. Cup is sweeter, more umami, less astringent. Premium pricing, £30-100+ per 100g.

Bancha

Lower grade sencha, older leaves, later harvest. Lighter cup, lower caffeine. Affordable everyday drinking.

Hojicha (????, "roasted tea")

Roasted bancha. Pan roasted at high heat after the steaming and rolling. Cup is dark amber, toasty, lower in caffeine (15-25mg vs 30-40mg). Excellent evening green tea.

Genmaicha (???, "brown rice tea")

Sencha + roasted brown rice. Toasty vegetal cup, lower caffeine because of rice content. Often called "popcorn tea" for its aromatic. More on genmaicha.

Matcha (??)

Stone ground green tea powder. Made from "tencha", flat dried, stem removed leaves. Whisked with hot water rather than steeped. Whole leaf consumption produces dramatically higher catechin and caffeine per cup. More on matcha.

Kabuse cha

"Covered tea", sencha shaded for 7-14 days (less than gyokuro). Mid tier between sencha and gyokuro. Specialist availability.

Kukicha (??, "stem tea")

Stems and twigs from tea processing brewed as tea. Very low caffeine, mildly sweet. Niche but interesting.

The Japanese tea regions

- **Shizuoka.** Largest tea producing region. Standard sencha and bancha.
- **Uji (Kyoto).** Historical heart of Japanese tea. Premium gyokuro and matcha.
- **Kagoshima.** Southern Japan, warmer climate, large modern production.
- **Yame.** Premium sencha and gyokuro.
- **Sayama.** Specialised in pan fired sencha (a Japanese rarity).

How to brew Japanese green tea

Sencha

- Water at 70-80°C (NOT boiling)
- 1 heaped tsp per 200ml
- Steep 1-2 minutes
- Drink black
- Yields 2-3 infusions

Gyokuro

- Water at 50-60°C (much cooler than sencha)
- 1 heaped tsp per 100ml (concentrated brewing)
- Steep 2 minutes
- Drink in small cups

- Yields 3-4 infusions

Hojicha

- Water at 90-95°C (tolerates higher heat)
- 1 tsp per 200ml
- Steep 1-2 minutes
- Drinks well black or with a touch of milk

Matcha

- Sift 1-2g into a bowl
- Add 70ml of 70-80°C water
- Whisk briskly with bamboo chasen for 15-30 seconds
- Drink immediately

Caffeine across Japanese green teas

Type	Caffeine per 200ml cup
Matcha (per gram)	60-80mg
Gyokuro	50-70mg
Sencha	30-50mg
Bancha	20-30mg
Hojicha	15-25mg
Genmaicha	15-25mg
Kukicha	10-20mg

The umami factor

Japanese green tea's defining flavour is umami, the savoury "fifth taste." High L theanine content (especially in shaded teas like gyokuro) produces a marine savoury character that Chinese green tea (lower L theanine) doesn't replicate. The cup is savoury and sweet rather than just vegetal.

Storage

Japanese green tea is delicate. Best within 6-12 months of opening. Matcha within 4-6 weeks. Airtight tin, cool dark cupboard.

Buying Japanese tea in the UK

- **Clearspring.** UK organic specialist; excellent Japanese green range.
- **Yamamotoyama.** Japanese brand widely distributed.

- **teas.co.uk, with Mei Leaf and Postcard Teas among its trade friends.** Premium specialist retailers.
- **Asian groceries.** Often best value for everyday Japanese green.
- **Direct Japanese imports.** Some Japanese tea estates ship internationally.

FAQ

What's the best Japanese green tea? Sencha for daily drinking, gyokuro for premium experience, matcha for whole leaf intensity.

Why does Japanese green taste different from Chinese green? Steam fixing (Japan) vs pan firing (China) produces different flavour profiles.

Is matcha really high in caffeine? Yes, whole leaf consumption delivers 60-80mg per gram of powder vs 30-40mg per cup of steeped sencha.

Best brewing temperature? 70-80°C for most Japanese greens. Gyokuro 50-60°C. NEVER boiling water.

Where to buy in UK? teas.co.uk, Clearspring for organic mainstream, friends like Mei Leaf for specialist single origin, and Asian groceries for everyday value.

Curator's note: Japanese green tea is the underexplored category for most British drinkers. The umami character is unlike anything in the British tea tradition. Worth investing in proper sencha (and brewing it at 75°C, not boiling) at least once. Lee, teas.co.uk, Tunbridge Wells.

Reference noted

- EFSA Scientific Opinion on the Safety of Caffeine (2015)

The teas that come up around this subject: English Breakfast, Earl Grey, green tea, loose leaf tea, Darjeeling, oolong, and herbal tea. Have a wander through the tea range; UK orders above £35 cost nothing to deliver.

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · Japanese tea comes down to what each cup costs, not the tin. Loose leaf sencha mostly wins, with the odd supermarket bag keeping close.

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