Imbibing green tea as a form of social lubrication or in the course of relaxation is integral to Japan's culture, and Kyoto's Yamashiro region is the historical nexus of leafy production.

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FROM the expert flick of the wrist while whipping finely ground *matcha* into a froth during a tea ceremony to the terraced tea fields lining the hillsides across the country, and the casual cups of *sencha* (everyday green tea) offered when visiting a friend, tea culture is virtually synonymous with Japanese culture. Tea is served in offices, when visiting family, and at many shops when a customer is considering a major purchase. It’s hard to imagine life in Japan without tea. In fact, explains Yusuke Matsubayashi of Kyoto’s Asahiyaki pottery workshop, even though it is now called the living room, an older expression for the common space in a home is *cha no ma* (literally “tea space”).

Aside from the cold northern region of Hokkaido, tea is produced in every part of Japan, and the nation offers a number of representative brands. Shizuoka Tea hails from the nation’s foremost tea-producing region, accounting for 40 percent of national output. Sayama Tea from Saitama Prefecture, located near Tokyo, gained popularity among common people in the nation’s capital during the Edo Period (1603-1868). Yame Tea from Fukuoka Prefecture is known for high-quality *gyokuro*, a kind of green tea made from plants shaded during cultivation. Chocolate and ice cream made with Japanese green tea have even recently seen a rise in popularity overseas.

Many regions in the country harvest excellent Japanese tea. But to visit the Yamashiro region, just south of Kyoto City in Kyoto Prefecture, is to connect to the origins of tea in Japan, which stretch back twelve centuries. Tea first filtered into Japan from China via Buddhist temples, and was enjoyed as an import for a few hundred years. About eight hundred years ago, however, tea cultivation began in Uji. The story of the area’s tea culture is now registered under Japan Heritage as *A Historical Walk Through 800 Years of Japanese Tea*.

Tsuen Tea, situated on the east side of famed Uji Bridge, has been in business since 1160 and is Japan’s oldest continuously operating purveyor of tea. Yusuke Tsuen, the 24th-generation owner of the shop, explains the history as he heats water over a brazier and then uses a bamboo ladle to pour it first into the teacups, then the teapot, checking the temperature by touch. First serving as bridge guards for high-ranking
officials, the Tsuen family began offering tea to daimyo (lords), monks and other travelers crossing the bridge, eventually leading the clan to establish a tea shop. Travelers still flock to this iconic shop, coming from near and far to buy the high-quality sencha, matcha (ceremonial green tea powder), gyokuro, and countless other varieties.

Tsuen, whose long hair, black-framed glasses and cool young aspect belie the expertise with which he prepares the tea as strains of koto music play in the background, says you don’t have to be an expert in the tea ceremony to enjoy Japanese tea. “In our shop, we want our customers to drink tea however they like. If they enjoy it, that’s the most important thing.”

Tsuen Tea also sells tea sweets like matcha dango (chewy pounded rice dumplings), matcha pound cakes and matcha ice cream parfaits with sweet red beans and bits of mochi, but he doesn’t recommend eating tea-flavored sweets while drinking tea. “It muddies the flavor of the tea,” he notes. Instead, he says, try drinking tea with other sweets or snacks, or on its own.

In the nearby town of Wazuka, visitors can explore tea cultivation up close. The Wazukacha Café, situated near hillside tea fields, features a small shop with local teas where guests can learn tea preparation techniques. The café also rents out electric-assist bicycles so visitors can explore the picturesque undulating green fields at their leisure, gliding through a tableau dotted with the occasional worker in a wide-brimmed hat bent over the bushes, handpicking tender tea leaves. The fields in this area are family-owned, with about three hundred small farms situated shoulder to shoulder. One person can manage about 1.5 hectares; a pair, such as a married couple, might cultivate twice that. Electric pedal power makes riding over the hills a breeze, and the scene couldn’t be prettier.

Back near Uji Bridge, the Asahiyaki pottery workshop sits unobtrusively on a handsome cobbled path next to the river. Established by the Matsubayashi family in 1600, Asahiyaki has been making exquisite tea ceramics for over four centuries and through more than fifteen generations, with every piece made by hand onsite. Beginning with matcha bowls, Asahiyaki has created tea vessels for nobility and tea masters, and around 150 years ago during the Edo Era developed a distinctive teapot especially made for sencha. The clay is sourced in Uji from the same land that produces the tea, and the same water used to prepare the tea for drinking is used in creating the pieces. The craftsmanship
and centuries of practice put into making vessels expressly suited to Japanese tea certainly heightens the drinking experience. “If people from overseas can enjoy Japanese culture through tea drinking, I think that’s great,” says Matsubayashi.

To steep themselves further in the history of sencha, visitors can visit Obakusan Mampuku-ji Temple in Uji City. Founded by Chinese Zen master Ingen, this temple is the head of the Obaku Zen sect, one of several Zen sects in Japan. It’s also the temple famous for popularizing senchado, or “the way of steeped tea,” in the eighteenth century. In addition to the raked gravel, lotus flowers and Chinese air of the temple, guests can enjoy steeped tea and Zen Buddhist vegetarian cuisine here.

The Ujicha Dojo is for those who take their tea quite seriously and want to learn how to prepare tea and perform the tea ceremony from tea professionals. The methods used here—as overseen by Isamu Tamiya, a tea ceremony practitioner for sixty years—are exacting: the water for gyokuro, for example, must be heated to 70°C, and gradually cooled to 40°C, before forty milliliters are added to five grams of tea leaves and allowed to steep until the water is absorbed and the tea assumes a certain shade of green. For some this may seem fussy, and that’s okay, but for others, the meditative practice may yield some relaxation (and the perfect cuppa to boot).

Finally, a stroll down the Byodoin Omotesando, a flagstoned shopping street that runs from the west side of Uji Bridge to the UNESCO-recognized Byodo-in Temple, will turn up a double handful of tea shops and cafés for browsing and snacking. Tea connoisseurs won’t be disappointed with a trip to Uji—there’s plenty to absorb.

Yusuke Tsuen has some parting tea wisdom. “You don’t have to take it too seriously. Have fun with tea. Drink it the way it’s most delicious to you—drinking it for a long time is good for your body too,” he says. “If you are trying to whip matcha and you’re in a bad mood or irritated, by the way, the tea will not foam properly. Tea is like that. Depending on your condition and mood, the taste of it changes. Please, drink tea and find the way that you prefer.”

7 Tsuen Tea’s matcha parfait
8 An array of green teas at Wazukacha Café
9 Making tea bowls at Asahiyaki
10 Asahiyaki’s kiln is in constant use
11 Manpuku Temple in Uji City, where the practice of senchado (steeping tea) was popularized
12 The tools of the art at Ujicha Dojo
13 Many teahouses and venerable shops are situated near Uji Bridge