

Turning a New Tealeaf

Stéphane Danton, who hails from France and is based in Kichijoji in the suburbs of Tokyo, is spreading the word about the allure of Japanese tea from a completely new perspective to those in Japan and around the world. Masaki Yamada interviewed Danton over one of his original teas.

Stéphane Danton's specialty Japanese teahouse Ocharaka is on a corner of a shopping district in Kichijoji, an area bustling with young people. The store's interior, which is lined with boxes that encase various types of Japanese tea, has an ambiance of an elegant café, with mostly young women streaming into the shop.

"The general perception is that Japanese tea tends to be preferred by the elderly, but a lot of young women visit our shop. By drinking the flavored teas that I have created, these women, perhaps, might be discovering brand new flavors and ways to enjoy Japanese tea," says Danton.

Danton, who was born in Lyon, France and had been interested in Japanese culture,

moved to Japan in 1992. Having been certified as a sommelier in his home country, he came to Japan with the intention to work in a wine-related business, but ended up in a specialty tea shop in Aoyama, Tokyo. This shop carried 440 types of tea from around the world, including teas from China, Sri Lanka, India and Brazil. And also among these teas was Japanese tea.

"Just like wine, the flavor and fragrance of Japanese tea change ever so slightly depending on the source ingredient. This delicate characteristic of Japanese tea is what appeals to me. After working at the tea shop for some time, I started to wonder if there was a new way of drinking Japanese tea that could be translated to the rest of the world. But I barely had any knowledge of the types and source ingredients of Japanese tea. So I decided to visit tea-growing regions all over Japan."

From Hokkaido in the north down to Okinawa in the south, Danton deepened his knowledge of Japanese tea by venturing to tea farms across the country, speaking directly with the producers and witnessing the conditions of tealeaves and trees on the plantations with his own eyes. This is how he happened upon Kawane tea, which is harvested in



A glass of cold Kyoho grape-flavored Japanese tea

ALL PHOTOS TADASHI AIZAWA

Stéphane Danton holds up a tray of his peach-flavored tealeaves.



Kawane-cho in Shizuoka Prefecture, one of the leading tea-growing regions in Japan.

“I found Kawane tea to be the kind of tea that satiates my sense of sight, smell and taste, but felt that in its original state, it wouldn’t translate that well into sales overseas. There is a strong sense in the western world that Japanese tea equates to *matcha* and so it’s bitter. And the impression is that one cannot enjoy Japanese tea casually like wine. So this is how I came up with blending fruit aromas into cold-brewed Japanese tea; in other words, flavored Japanese tea.”



Customers enjoy flavored Japanese teas at Ocharaka in Kichijoji, Tokyo

Danton created and commercialized around thirty types of flavored tea that retain the flavor of Kawane tea but are blended with aroma extracted from fruit including that from summer tangerines, Kyoho grapes, peaches and blackcurrants. He opened Ocharaka in 2005 as a base for his overseas busi-

ness. The name Ocharaka is a pun on the words *ocha*, meaning tea, and *ocharakasu*, which means to tease. At the world fair in Zaragoza, Spain, in 2008, Danton’s creation, the Valencia orange flavored tea, was a hit in the Japanese pavilion.

In fact, I tried the Kyoho grape flavored tea. The subtle sweet and sour aroma of the grapes and the refreshing sensation were indeed something I had not experienced before in a Japanese tea.

“We sell flavored teas overseas on the Internet now, but orders from abroad only amount to around 10% of overall sales. I think there are various ways to grow sales. I am focusing on direct sales because I would like to communicate the stories behind Japanese teas to my clients: like the allure of their source ingredients or how they are transformed into merchandise. So my dream, first of all, is to open a directly managed Japanese tea shop in my hometown in Lyon. I would like to continue increasing the number of flavored teas as well.”



Masako Yamada is a freelance writer.