

A New Way of Tea

Holly Helt, Alex Sanson and pet dog Jasmine outside Chiki Tea café in Nakatsu, Oita Prefecture

Chiki
tea

HOLLY HELT &
ALEX SANSON

Green tea connoisseurs Holly Helt and Alex Sanson are introducing a fresh take on the brew to the tea drinkers of Japan through their popular Chiki Tea café and online store.

ROB GILHOOLY

IN 2013 Holly Helt and Alex Sanson came to Japan – to Kyushu in particular – with a clear objective: To locate the nation’s best tea producers and highest quality teas. A year later, having found their tea, they decided the best way to share it with the world would be by opening a café chain, starting in Nakatsu, Oita Prefecture, where they were based. The off-beat café that American Helt and Briton Sanson would build from scratch was destined to cause much more than just a storm in a teapot.

When Chiki Tea opened in 2014, there was none

of the stiffness that often typifies traditional Japanese tea houses. Carefully sourced *matcha* as well as *kabusecha* and other tea cultivars were served not in *chawan* tea bowls, but in demitasse cups, while Japanese sweets were replaced by chocolate brownies, scones and cheese cake – all in a self-designed space oozing sophistication and warmth.

“I wanted Japanese tea to be viewed not as intimidating, but something that is accessible and fun, a pleasure of life,” says Helt, who first thought about opening a café back in New York over a decade ago, when she was helping to promote and market Chinese tea to the West.

It was around that time that she came up with the café name “Chiki,” which, she explains, is the combination of two Chinese characters that she interprets as meaning “the way of the child.”

“The idea is that everyone has an inner child and



- 1 Holly Helt serves a customer at Chiki Tea
- 2 A nice cup of *matcha* and a brownie
- 3 “Sweet, fresh and summery” *kabusecha* tea
- 4 Holly Helt at Chiki Tea

Chiki’s job is to help you access that inner child,” she says. “We do that through fun quirky teapots that don’t conform to conventions, and Western flavors that pair well with Japanese teas. This makes for an easier gateway into the whole tea experience.”

Helt says her fascination with Japanese tea has been brewing since it was introduced to her by her soda-loathing mother as a toddler, when she spent some time in Japan following her father’s work placement here.

In 2008 she met Sanson, a graphic designer by trade who found her enthusiasm for Japan’s national beverage infectious. “I fell in love with the flavor of green tea immediately,” he says.

So much so, in fact, that by 2013 the couple had established a company selling a variety of Japanese teas to British and American consumers via the Internet.

The success of that operation encouraged Helt and Sanson to take their business in a new and arguably even more challenging direction, opening a café close to one of Japan’s best known tea-growing regions.

“Our mission was to come here – to Kyushu in particular – and find the very best quality teas,” says Helt, who is a long-time student of *sado* tea ceremony and a self-confessed “tea hunter.” “There are a lot of products in the West that just have ‘green tea’ written on the back. But that’s not necessarily a guarantee of quality or good taste. There are hundreds of varieties in Japan and I was sure many of them must be considerably better.”

Helt’s hunting expeditions in the Kyushu countryside – usually accompanied by her dog Jasmine – unveiled some prize findings, including the

award-winning Hoshino Tea Gardens in the Yame district of western Fukuoka.

Hoshino became Helt’s first grower of what she classes “rock star” status. “It takes a truly skilled artisan to pull out from the leaves the exceptional taste that we have been finding from these rock stars,” says Helt, who has penned a book about Japanese tea – *Green is the New Black* – with illustrations by Sanson. “They will know immediately how to bring out certain characteristics of tea grown in a certain region.”

While Helt and Sanson have now sourced many high-quality loose leaf teas, customers at Chiki Tea have shown a greater penchant for their Silk matcha, which is also from the Yame region.

“We quickly discovered that the younger generation is not drinking so much loose leaf and that demand for matcha has placed a strain on supply,” says Sanson. “We would never have known this if we hadn’t opened the café. In many ways, it has been a steep learning curve, but one we have benefitted from hugely.”

The couple is now looking to take their brand to other cities in Japan. “In the next Chiki iteration there will be more food on the menu,” says Helt, who bakes all the cakes and other items on the Chiki Tea menu in a bakery she built on the premises in central Nakatsu. “But we love high quality teas and the focus will remain on hunting down the best teas and making them accessible to everyone.” **U**

All photos: Rob Gillhooly