

A tea field in Wazuka-cho,
Kyoto Prefecture
All photos: Tadashi Aizawa

Everyone's Cup of Tea

Tea lovers from around the world are buying in to Kyoto Obubu Tea Farms.

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WAZUKA-CHO in Kyoto Prefecture is known to connoisseurs of Japanese tea as the heartland of Uji tea, one of the most highly prized tea brands in all Japan. They began cultivating tea here, close to the town of Uji which gives the tea its generic name, early in the thirteenth century, and today Wazuka-cho accounts for close to half of Kyoto Prefecture's total tea production. Many of the town's population of about 4,200 people are tea farmers.

In the Kyoto dialect, tea is referred to as "*obubu*," a slang word that is now familiar to thousands of people overseas who have visited Wazuka-cho to learn about tea farming and culture at Kyoto Obubu Tea Farms. Established in 2004, Kyoto Obubu Tea Farms is an organization with a mission to bring quality Japanese tea to the world, contribute to the local and global community through tea, and enhance interest in tea and agriculture through education.

As part of its business cultivating and selling premium tea, Obubu Tea Farms operates a training program for non-Japanese tea enthusiasts. Over a period of three months, foreign interns help to manage the online shop and other customer services while learn-

ing about the cultivation, processing, and cultural aspects of Japanese tea. Since it launched the program in 2012, Obubu Tea Farms has accepted over sixty interns from seventeen countries.

The foreign interns play a key role coordinating Obubu Team Farms' twice weekly Tea Tours, which this year will attract some 1,000 foreign visitors.

"Many of our visitors hail from the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe, where there are established tea-drinking cultures," notes Yasuharu Matsumoto, vice president of Obubu Tea Farms and a Japanese tea instructor.

After a warm welcome at the farmhouse in the morning, Tea Tour participants get their first experience of Japanese tea agriculture after a 20-minute drive up a steep mountain road to a mountain peak commanding spectacular views of the surrounding tea fields. Here participants are taught the correct way to pick tea, with farm staff and interns explaining the importance of picking the buds, whose leaves have yet to open on the tips of the branches, and the two leaves just beneath them using just one hand. Tour participants spend about an hour in the field picking tea leaves, flowers, and seeds.



1 Fiona Kewley, a British intern at Kyoto Obubu Tea Farms, talks with participants on one of the company's Tea Tours.
2 A tea lover familiarizes himself with the smell of raw *aracha* tea leaves.
3 The sampling of teas



The afternoon is given over to a tea tasting session. Obubu Tea Farms uses *aracha* tea leaves exclusively for its products, *aracha* being unrefined tea that uses the entire leaf and stem with nothing going to waste. At Obubu Tea Farms, the *aracha* tea leaves are steamed, rubbed, and partially dried on the same day that they are harvested. A variety of *aracha* teas are sampled including such popular styles as *hojicha*, *genmaicha* and *matcha*. Many participants have such a strong preconception of what Japanese tea tastes like that they are surprised by the different aromas and flavors of these contrasting tea styles.

In 2009, Obubu Tea Farms introduced a tea field ownership system under which subscribers receive a delivery of teas grown and processed by the company four times a year in return for a monthly part-ownership fee of 1,500 yen. The program has so

far attracted approximately 900 subscribers from sixteen countries, including Japan. Retail sales of the company's wide variety of teas are conducted mostly through its lively and instructive English-language website and online store, with customers from no fewer than sixty-five countries having so far placed orders.

"Agriculture is a risky business and traditionally farmers have had to bear the financial burden of ownership on their own. However, in recent years the concept of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has gained traction, this being a type of agriculture that is supported by consumers as well as local communities," says Matsumoto. "Our tea field ownership system is one example. Obubu Tea Farms aims to achieve sustainable agriculture and serve as a new business model for tea." ^{HJ}