

It was during the Kamakura period that the custom of drinking tea in Japan was popularized by Eisai, a Japanese Buddhist monk. Ever since then tea has been an integral part of Japanese culture and daily life, from traditional tea ceremonies to the millions of cups of sencha that are now consumed each day.

There are lots of different types of tea and many different regions in Japan that grow it, however it is the region of Uji which is regarded by many to produce the best quality tea in the country, as well as having a very significant role in the history of Japanese tea. Earlier this year I was fortunate enough to be invited to a tea farm in Uji to learn more about the process of growing tea and the history of Ujicha (Uji tea).

Uji itself is just south of Kyoto, just under 30 minutes by train on the Nara line. At Uji JR station I met up with the rest of my group, a Japanese English teacher and some Japanese students, we then jumped on a bus heading out into the countryside. About 10 miles later the bus dropped us at the side of the road, we were then picked up by a few cars that the owners of the tea farm had kindly driven out to bring us further up the narrow winding roads to the tea farm.

We arrived at a small group of houses which was the base of the tea farm, after some introductions with the owner and employees we were then taken up a very steep winding track that led up the hill through the tall trees behind the houses. Reaching the top of the hill revealed the spectacular sight of what seemed like endless rows of green tea trees basking in the bright sunlight.

Some of the rows had large covers above them to shield the tea from direct sunlight, a covered tea farm like this is an Oishitaen, tea like tencha is grown this way. But most of the tea farm was uncovered (Rotenen), tea grown in this way is allowed to grow in direct sunlight. Sencha, the most common type of tea in Japan, is grown in this way. Getting the perfect amount of sunlight is very important to being able to grow high quality tea.

As we were led around the rows of tea I was told a bit more about the history of Ujicha and why Uji is such a great region for growing tea. There are several reasons for this, the overall climate throughout the year is ideal. Uji gets more than 1500mm of stable rainfall every year providing a consistent amount of pure water. The fertile soil in the area provides the ideal amounts of water retention and drainage. Steep valleys in the region create great temperature differences between day and night, resulting in mist or fog, which prevents frost, a big enemy of tea growing. All of these natural factors come together to create the perfect environment for growing tea.

It was because of these conditions that back in the Kamakura period the Buddhist monk Myoe chose the Uji region as the perfect place to begin cultivating tea in Japan, and why Uji gained its reputation for being the best region to grow tea. During the Muromachi period shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (known for building Kinkakuji) created a tea garden in Uji, which helped spread word of the quality of Ujicha to the rest of Japan. Though it wasn't actually until the beginning of the Edo period that the name Ujicha first came into use.

Further into the Edo period Nagatani Soen, a tea farmer in Ujitawara, made a stunning breakthrough by establishing the method for making sencha (the Ujicha method), this method involved hand kneading steamed tealeaves which are dried by a furnace, instead of the traditional pan roasting method. Wanting to make green tea more accessible to everyone he shared this method with others, and it wasn't long before the Ujicha method spread throughout the country.

As my history lesson of Ujicha drew to a close I noticed we were at an area with rows of bare soil, empty of any tea trees. It was here our group were given the opportunity to plant our own tea trees! The initial part of the process was like planting any other plant, using a trowel to dig a small hole just big enough for the roots, drop the tea tree in then hand pack the soil back around it.

The next part involved using some clippers to trim off some of the shoots / leaves from the main tree, now I have to be honest I've actually forgotten the exact reason why this was as at the time I was just too excited about the fact I was planting tea in Japan! All I can remember for certain is it was something to do with water retention, or limiting the amount of water the tree initially took in. With a short row of tea trees planted all that was left was to give a small bit of water to the trees, before adding the final touch of a small sign with my name and a date on it so I can return to harvest them in the future!

Once the planting was concluded it was time to take in one last sight of the tea fields and descend back down the steep track, ideally without falling down it, toward the base of buildings below. Some tables and chairs had been put out, each table containing some Japanese side handed teapots and some cups. The challenge we were given was to gauge the correct amount of water and time to brew the perfect cup of sencha.

Much to the amusement of the others I failed quite miserably, I didn't put enough water over the tealeaves in the teapot, then I left it to brew for too long, this resulted in the tea leaves completely absorbing all of the water, leaving nothing to pour out! Once the experts were done laughing at my failed attempt they decided to teach the correct way of how it should be done.

For the quantities the amount of tealeaves per person should be about 5g, and the water about 60cc for a cup. With the leaves in the teapot, pour in the water which needs to be between 70-80 degrees C, it's worth knowing that water cools 5-10 degrees when it's transferred. Then pop the lid back on and leave it to brew for between 45 seconds to 1 minute, then it's ready to pour out and drink. If you are making multiple cups then when pouring you should pour a little into each cup at a time to ensure that each cup of tea is given the same flavour.

As you would expect the tea tasted amazing! After more tea drinking, chatting and thanking everyone at the tea farm it was time to conclude the my incredible tea themed experience for the day. Hopefully next year I'll join them again and learn about the harvest season, as well as harvest the tea I planted.