

## **Japanese Tea: A Historical Overview**

The tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) is native to East and South Asia and originated more than 2,200 years ago in the region bordering north Myanmar and southwest China. Tea was first introduced into Japan from China during the Heian period (794–1185).

Prominent Buddhist monks like Eichu, Saicho, and Kukai brought tea to Japan during the ninth century, and in the year 815, Eichu is believed to have served tea to Emperor Saga (r. 809–823). This event is considered the beginning of tea-drinking culture in Japan.

Tea became a status symbol among members of the shogunate during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), and tea ceremonies began to evolve with the establishment of schools dedicated to the art.

### *Origins of Matcha*

Toward the end of the twelfth century, the Buddhist monk Eisai established a set of guidelines for preparing tea, including a recommendation of the powdered form called matcha. This type of tea is believed to have originated with the use of high-grade *dancha* (steamed and compressed tea leaves) to produce a green powder. The powder was then placed in a bowl, hot water was added from a kettle, and the mixture was whipped with a bamboo whisk to produce a thick, foamy texture, just as it is today.

### *Origins of Sencha*

In 1662 a Chinese monk named Ingen (Chinese name Yinyuan Longqi), traveled to Japan and established the Obaku school of Zen Buddhism at Manpukuji Temple in Uji, Kyoto. He is credited with popularizing a form of tea called *sencha*, which is extracted by boiling leaves and stems. His influence led to the custom of drinking tea throughout society during the Edo period (1603–1867).

### *Ureshino Tea: Origins and Roasting Method*

People began to grow tea in the Ureshino area around 600 years ago. Yoshimura Shinbei (1603–1657), who cleared wide areas of land in the surrounding hills to create tea plantations, is considered the father of Ureshino tea. Tea planted by Shinbei can still be found in nearby plantations today, including the ancient, giant tea tree Daichanoki, now over 340 years old.

Ureshino's unique *kamairicha* method of roasting tea in iron pans began in this area more than 500 years ago. The pans are tilted at a 45-degree angle, and tea leaves and stems are roasted at temperatures reaching over 350°C while continuously stirring them in the pan, giving the roasted tea its iconic, rounded shape.

#### *An International Reputation*

The tea produced in Ureshino is of a very high quality and has long attracted the attention of visitors from abroad. When the German physician and botanist Philipp Franz von Siebold came to Japan in 1823 and gathered samples of the flora, fauna, and folk culture of the country, *kamairicha* from Ureshino became part of his collection.

During the Edo period, Japan was almost entirely closed off from trade with the outside world. In the following Meiji era (1868–1912), trade relationships were reestablished with other countries. Japanese green tea became a highly sought-after export due to the foresight of a female merchant in Nagasaki named Oura Kei (1828–1884), who was the first to export Ureshino tea to other countries. Thanks largely to her pioneering efforts, Ureshino tea is now enjoyed by people all over the world.