Wazuka Tea

The town of Wazuka in southeastern Kyoto Prefecture is a *chagenkyo*, or "ancestral homeland of tea." For centuries, Wazuka farmers have made use of favorable environmental conditions and fertile soil to grow aromatic tea. Traditions and agricultural methods inherited over generations are combined with modern ingenuity to produce tea that is renowned worldwide for its exceptionally high quality.

The History of Tea Cultivation in Wazuka

Tea cultivation in Wazuka is thought to have started in the early thirteenth century, shortly after tea seeds were brought to Kyoto from China by the influential Zen master Eisai (1141–1215). According to legend, Eisai gave seeds to Myoe (1173–1232), the head priest of Kosanji Temple, who gifted seeds in turn to the priest Jishin of Kaijusenji Temple. Jishin cultivated these seeds at the base of Mt. Jubuzan in Wazuka. Records from the late sixteenth century reference a tea field planted in the Harayama area of Wazuka that was used for private tea production. Though the cultivation

methods used were still quite rudimentary, Wazuka's reputation for tea can be dated back to this point.

Wazuka's history as a center of tea production becomes clearer in the Edo period (1603–1867). In 1734, Wazuka tea was listed on a shogunate document ranking high-quality regional products. Some years later, a method was popularized for making *sencha*, a type of whole-leaf tea processed by steaming and drying while rolling instead of pan heating and air-drying in the then–traditional manner. The number of farmers specializing in *sencha* rose as this method spread, and the tea industry in Wazuka expanded even further. Sales records indicate that by the late nineteenth century, Wazuka tea was even being shipped to international ports like Yokohama and Kobe for sale abroad.

Tea produced in Wazuka was often labeled as "Uji tea" because of its location near the larger and better-known tea-producing region of Uji. Today, approximately 49 percent of the "Uji tea" grown in Kyoto Prefecture is actually produced in Wazuka. For centuries, the town's economy and

community have revolved around the many tea plantations that cover the surrounding hills.

Growing Conditions in Wazuka

The geography and environmental conditions in Wazuka make the town ideal for cultivating tea. Crisp, cool air passes over the gentle hills and dense forests, and the flow of the Wazuka River provides nourishing water and generates mists that form when the temperature changes between night and day. These mists shield the tea plants from overexposure to the sun, keeping the leaves soft and preventing loss of flavor. The steep slopes of the tea fields help assure that the soil retains adequate moisture and has good drainage. It is this rich environment that made Wazuka so valued as a *shoen* (agricultural estate) in centuries past, when it was administered by powerful entities such as Kofukuji Temple in Nara, Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in Kyoto, and the imperial household.

Today, approximately 412 hectares (1,018 acres) of land in Wazuka are used for tea cultivation, producing some 1,100 tons of unrefined tea

(*aracha*) per year. Around 200 farmers harvest the tea leaves, which are sent to 100 processing facilities.

Characteristics of Wazuka Tea

Wazuka is known for primarily producing *sencha,* a type of tea cultivated in direct sunlight until it is shaded just before the first or second harvest period when the leaves are tender and rich with nutrients. The quality of tea is evaluated based on four criteria: shape, color, aroma, and flavor. Compared to tea produced in other regions, Wazuka tea is said to possess a fresh fragrance, and the taste balances notes of both sweetness and umami. When the leaves are lightly steamed, the finished drink brews to a light golden green.

In recent years, Wazuka farmers have begun producing large amounts of *tencha*, the type of tea that becomes matcha powder when ground. *Tencha* is well-suited for use in foods where a green-tea element is desired. The next time you have matcha ice cream, bottled tea, a matcha frappe, or a matcha-flavored sweet, you may be enjoying the high-quality tea produced

in the scenic fields of Wazuka.