

## **Wazuka Tea**

### *The History of Tea Cultivation in Wazuka*

Cultivation of tea (*Camellia sinensis*) in Wazuka may have started in the early thirteenth century. According to legend, some of the first tea seeds brought to Kyoto from China by the influential Zen master Eisai (1141–1215) wound up in the hands of Jishin, a priest at Kaijusenji Temple, who cultivated them at Mt. Jubuzan in Wazuka. Historical records from the late sixteenth century can be found that reference the planting of a private tea field in Harayama, at the foot of that mountain. Though cultivation methods used at the time were still quite rudimentary, Wazuka's reputation as a source of tea began to grow.

Wazuka tea was listed in shogunate documents ranking high-quality regional products as early as 1734. A few years later, a new method for making *sencha* was developed; instead of pan heating and air-drying, the whole leaves were steamed, then dried by kneading and rolling. *Sencha* production became widespread among local farmers, and the tea industry in Wazuka expanded even further. In the nineteenth century, Wazuka tea

was being sold domestically as well as shipped abroad via international ports like Yokohama and Kobe.

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 grown in Wazuka.

#### *Growing Conditions in Wazuka*

The geography and environmental conditions in Wazuka make the town ideal for cultivating tea. The flow of the Wazuka River encourages the formation of mist in the valley, which helps shield the tea plants from overexposure to the sun and keeps the leaves tender and flavorful. Naturally poor drainage caused by weathered mudstone in the soil is overcome by cultivating the tea on steep slopes, which promotes good drainage and water retention.

Approximately 412 hectares (1,018 acres) of land in Wazuka is currently being used for tea cultivation. Over 5,600 tons of tea harvested by some 200 farmers is processed in more than 100 facilities to produce 1,100

tons of unrefined tea (*aracha*) per year.

### *Characteristics of Wazuka Tea*

Wazuka farmers produce a variety of teas, but the town is primarily known for *sencha*, a type of tea cultivated in direct sunlight until shortly before it is harvested early in the spring, when the leaves are tender and rich in nutrients. Wazuka *sencha* 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 brew has a pale golden-green color.

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.