

BREWING A PERFECT CUP OF TEA

The art of Japanese tea preparation and presentation involves paying attention to water temperature, steeping time, and serving methods. If the water is hotter than required, the delicate taste of green tea might be lost; steeping too long can produce teas that are dark and bitter.

The Japanese traditionally serve sencha in small delicate tea cups; hojicha and kukicha are generally served in larger, handle-less mugs. Tea is never served with sugar or milk - if sweetness is desired, a little rice syrup can be added.

Kukicha is the easiest Japanese tea to brew. Unlike other varieties, which are never boiled, kukicha is simmered to extract the full flavor from its twigs.

Simply add three level tablespoons of kukicha to one quart of water, bring to a boil, and simmer gently for three to five minutes. Pour the tea through a strainer into the cups, and return the twigs to the pot. The twigs can be used once again, but a few fresh twigs may need to be added for full-bodied flavor. If you are using kukicha tea bags, steep one tea bag in one cup of hot water for five to six minutes. Serve hot or chilled with lemon if you prefer. For a refreshing summer drink, combine chilled kukicha with an equal portion of apple juice.

Hojicha and sencha are closely related and are brewed in the same way. Because sencha contains more caffeine, however, it is served in smaller quantities, and is never used to quench one's thirst. A large teapot is useful if you are serving more than two people. Warm the teapot by filling it with hot water. Pour the water out and add one level tablespoon of tea for each cup of water you will be boiling. In another pot, bring cold, pure water to a full boil, then immediately remove it from the heat. Let the water sit a minute before pouring it over the tea leaves or tea bag in the warmed pot. Allow the tea to steep for only a minute, or it will become bitter. If you are using bulk tea, strain it as it is poured into the cups. Alternate pouring a little tea into each cup, until the pot is completely drained. This pouring method will ensure each person's tea to be about the same strength. The leaves may be reused once or twice. For both sencha and hojicha, fresh leaves should not be added to used ones - discard spent leaves, rinse the pot, and begin fresh. Unlike sencha, which becomes bitter when cooled, hojicha makes a delicious and refreshing cool summer beverage.

Sencha, hojicha, and kukicha are available in good-quality tea bags and in bulk. However, if stored improperly, these teas can become stale quickly. Buy no more than a one month supply at a time, and keep it stored in an airtight container in a cool, dry place.