



# THE RISE OF MATCHA: UNDERSTANDING QUALITY, SEASONALITY, & SUPPLY

*Reiko Piekarski, Director of Coffee Programs | Fortuna Enterprises, LLC*

Over the last couple of years, matcha has gone from a quiet and mindful tradition in Japanese tea ceremonies to a vibrant staple in food and beverage culture. With its rich emerald-green hue; its smooth, earthy, and often umami flavor; and its reputation for health benefits, matcha has become a swift favorite among customers looking for an alternative to coffee that is refreshing, mindful, and energizing.

## **What Exactly is Matcha?**

Matcha is a finely ground powder made from shade-grown, supple green tea leaves called *tencha*. Producing authentic matcha is a meticulous, time-honored process, rooted in Japanese tradition. Every step is intentional in preserving the tea's flavor, texture, and color.

A few weeks before harvesting, tea plants are covered with shade cloths to limit sunlight. This boosts chlorophyll production, which contributes to the vivid green color and increases L-theanine, the amino acid responsible for matcha's smooth, umami flavor. Only the youngest and most tender leaves at the top of the plants are picked by hand. The leaves are quickly steamed to stop oxidation, then dried to preserve freshness and color. Once dried, the *tencha* leaves are ground slowly between granite stones into a fine powder. The milling process takes time, only producing 30 grams in an hour's time. It is this careful process that results in the vibrant, aromatic, and nutrient-dense tea power we have come to recognize as matcha.

## Caffeine Comparison

Coffee: 100 mg

Matcha: 68 mg

Hojicha: <10 mg

Unlike regular green tea, where the leaves are steeped and discarded, drinking matcha means consuming the entire leaf. The consumer then gets all its nutrients, antioxidants, and caffeine in every sip. The result is a rich, velvety beverage with a bright green color and a taste that balances sweetness, umami, and subtle bitterness. It's no wonder matcha has become a must-have on modern café menus, whether it's served hot, iced, or blended into creative beverages and pastries.

## Processing Matcha



A few weeks before harvesting, tea plants are shaded to produce a darker tea leaf and softer feel. The shaded growth enhances the natural sweetness and the vibrant green color.



Upon harvesting, only the youngest and most tender leaves at the top of the plants are picked by hand.



The leaves are quickly steamed to stop oxidation, then laid out to dry to preserve freshness and color.











Once dried, the leaves are ground slowly between granite stones into a fine powder, typically taking an hour to produce just 30 grams.

### Seasonality & Origin

The finest matcha is typically harvested in early spring, during the first flush, when new tea leaves are the most tender and flavorful. Japanese regions like Uji, Nishio, Shizuoka, and Kagoshima are celebrated for producing premium-grade matcha, with each offering subtle differences in taste and aroma. Much like coffee, tea production is seasonal and weather dependent, which can fluctuate supply. Late frost, heavy rainfall, and increase in demand can all affect availability and pricing, which is something we are all experiencing currently. Although tea may continue to be harvested beyond spring, summer and fall harvests will yield different grades of matcha flavor profiles.

## Understanding Matcha Grades

Much like coffee with its specialty and commodity grades, not all matcha is created equally. The grade of matcha determines its flavors, color, and best application of use. Ceremonial grade is the highest rated quality with a bright, vibrant color and a smooth, delicate flavor. This is reserved for traditional tea ceremony preparation or premium lattes and is often priced as such due to the limited availability. Premium grades will still have a balanced flavor and aroma, which makes them great for everyday use in cafés and beverages. Culinary grades will have a stronger and more robust flavor profile, which is designed for blending into smoothies, baked goods, and recipes where other flavors would complement the matcha. Knowing the different grades will help ensure the right matcha is paired with the appropriate menu application, both for flavor and cost efficiency.

Grade	Taste	Usage
 <b>High-End Ceremonial Grade</b> AAAAAAA	Strong, fresh, & mellow	High-end tea ceremony grade
 <b>Ceremonial Grade</b> AAAAAA	Strong, fresh, & mellow	Tea ceremony grade
 <b>Ceremonial Grade</b> AAAAA	Strong, fresh, & mellow	Tea ceremony grade
 <b>Ceremonial Grade</b> AAAA	Strong, fresh, & mellow	High-end culinary grade for drinks & baking
 <b>Premium Grade</b> AAA	Fresh & mellow	Medium culinary grade for drinks & baking
 <b>Standard Grade</b> AA	Fresh & mellow	Daily drinks and food grade
 <b>Primary Grade</b> A	Slightly bitter	Culinary grade for baking
 <b>Hojicha</b>	Nutty, earthy, & caramelly	Medium-low grade for drinks & baking

## Growing Popularity & Supply Challenges

The global fascination with matcha continues to grow. Social media has turned this vibrant green latte into an icon of wellness, creativity, and an alternative to caffeine. Customers now expect to see matcha offerings available on menus year-round. However, this surge has exasperated the supply chain. Traditional matcha production is limited by geography and time when it cannot simply be scaled overnight without sacrificing the quality. As a result, some cafés face higher prices, longer lead times for supply, or inconsistent availability.

With the increase in low-quality or counterfeit matcha entering the market, it is important for us to ensure the quality and integrity of matcha is upheld by working with trusted suppliers and tea vendors. True matcha should be green and smooth in texture with a rich flavor.

## How to Prepare Matcha



**Water Temperature: 165°F - 170°F**

\*For higher-grade Matcha, use water temperatures between **140°F - 165°F**. If the water is too hot or the tea brews for too long, the leaves will yield a strong, bitter taste.

**1.**

Sift 1/2 - 1 teaspoon (about 2.5 - 3 grams) of Matcha powder to break up the clumps.



**2.**

Gradually add water and whisk together vigorously until frothy.



**3.**

Pour the brewed matcha into a cup to build your desired beverage or to sip and enjoy!



## Mindfully Sip Forward

If you ever find matcha temporarily unavailable, don't panic! There are other creative and delicious alternatives. Hojicha powder is made from roasted green tea leaves and stems, which are milled down to a powder like matcha. This powder has a more toasted, caramel-like flavor and a lower caffeine content. This makes for a cozier and more aromatic latte or mocha alternative. Genmaicha is a green tea blend with roasted rice. Similar to hojicha, this tea offers a nutty and comforting profile, perfect for hot or cold brew applications. Offering alternatives keeps your beverage program lineup interesting and helps maintain customer satisfaction during supply shortages.

Behind every sip of matcha is a practice of patience, precision, and respect for tradition. As businesses understand where ingredients are sourced from and how global demand impacts the supply, this helps us all make more thoughtful choices and strengthens communication and transparency with customers. Whether you are a purist, frothing ceremonial-grade matcha with a bamboo whisk, or a casual drinker, celebrating the craft and culture behind this remarkable tea keeps the experience meaningful to your customer base. Just remind yourself, when matcha is not available, may the spirit of creativity that defines café culture encourage you to explore other beautiful beverages to share with your community.