

The Matcha MAKE

by Tiffany Picard

Twenty years ago, few people in North America had heard of matcha, and fewer still had actually tried it. Now the jade-green powdered tea from Japan is riding the wave of green tea's popularity and quietly developing a following around the world. Matcha has popped up everywhere, finding its way into body lotions, evening cocktails and (of course) tea cups.

Is matcha right for your customers? According to Jesse Jacobs, founder of San Francisco-based Samovar Tea Lounge, there's no such thing as a person who doesn't like matcha. Rather, it's a matter of finding the right form of matcha to fit each person's taste preference. "Never before have we sold so much," he says. "Demand has increased over the years."

TBar, an urban tea café in Philadelphia, demonstrates how matcha can fit every customer. On the food menu, the tea can be found in Japanese pastry rolls and cookies, imparting the sweets with a smooth, earthy, vegetal flavor. On the tea menu, two of

the most popular beverages have the product at their cores: the Matcha Latte, made with milk and served hot or iced, and the Choco-Matcha-Mint Latte. And to taste matcha in a more distilled form, TBar customers can order the tea served in the style of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. In this set-up, matcha powder is combined with a small amount of hot water and frothed with a bamboo whisk.



MATCHA'S ROOTS go back to the Song Dynasty, but it's finding a modern audience.



OVER

An ancient tea
in the modern age

In modern U.S. tea culture, matcha and the Japanese tea ceremony still carry an exotic mystique, which can be intimidating for the uninitiated. And some customers get sticker shock when they see the price for a tiny tin of tea, not realizing that one serving of matcha is a mere teaspoon or less. Despite these barriers, however, matcha is finding a niche in the 21st century.

Matcha begins as a shade-grown Japanese green tea, called *tencha*, which is milled into a fine powder. People in China began drinking powdered green tea during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). But while the Chinese eventually transitioned to loose-leaf teas, the Zen monks of Japan embraced the tradition of powdered tea, refining its method of preparation into the aforementioned ceremony still practiced today.

However, this ancient tea has adapted remarkably well to the modern world. One of the first indicators of matcha's mainstream appeal was the launch of Starbucks' Green Tea Latte in 2006. Alissa White, owner of Matcha Source, gets calls every week from folks who are "addicted" to Starbucks' Green Tea Latte and want to save money by making their own version of the drink at home. She also gives credit for matcha's recent popularity to the smoothie chain Jamba Juice, which offers "matcha shots" that combine the tea with soymilk or orange juice, and to the popular frozen yogurt franchise Pinkberry, which serves green tea frozen yogurt.

Matcha is a unique taste experience. "Once you drink matcha, you feel good almost immediately," says Calli O'Brien, sales and marketing director of matcha company DoMatcha. Because matcha is powdered, the entire leaf is consumed, unlike steeped teas

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in which the leaves are removed. This results in an exponentially higher level of antioxidants and other nutrients.

Studies have indicated that matcha contains up to 137 times more of the antioxidant EGCG than a normal cup of green tea. EGCG is the much-desired catechin in tea that has been shown to inhibit cancer cells in various studies. Matcha also has high levels of L-theanine, an amino acid that induces a state of calm, mental clarity and relaxation. L-theanine balances out the caffeine in matcha (which is also high because of how it's consumed), providing sustained energy without the caffeine jitters.



COURTESY OF DOMATCHA

MATCHA RECIPES come in many variations, including a tea and spiced matcha chai latte, which can be served hot or cold and includes traditional chai spices, bay leaf, vanilla almond milk and matcha.

This potent combination of flavor and health benefits makes matcha the ultimate green tea—at least according to those who market it. “We’re all looking for a little calm in this high-stress environment,” O’Brien says. “If not, we’re looking for energy. Matcha does all of this.”

Both DoMatcha and Matcha Source estimate that half their customers consume matcha in the traditional ceremonial style, while the rest enjoy matcha in modern adaptations. Regardless of the format in which you serve it, the key to selling matcha is making it approachable and preparing customers for what they’ll experience. What may seem “grassy” at first is actually matcha’s umami flavor—the rich, savory quality highly valued in Japanese cuisine. Matcha Source’s White describes matcha to customers as a “full-bodied tea that’s vegetal—similar to green tea ice cream or the first time you taste really dark chocolate. It’s an acquired taste, like bittersweet chocolate.” Susan Chu, TBar’s co-owner, uses different imagery: “I like to compare it to smelling fresh-cut grass in the beginning of spring.”

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Matcha's unique taste can make the drink hard for some customers to get their taste buds around, but Chu says retailers can use the opportunity to educate prospective matcha drinkers.

At TBar, servers bring the matcha powder, hot water and accoutrements to the table, then prepare it while customers observe—employees even show customers how to whisk the powder themselves if they so desire.

While you don't need to be a tea ceremony master to prepare a good bowl of matcha, it's still important to know the basics so that you may explain the process to interested customers. Talk to your vendor to learn the preparation specifics, and become familiar with basic implements like the tea scoop, tea bowl, bamboo whisk and matcha sifter, which smoothes out the tea powder.

Like all teas, matcha comes in various grades. Higher grades have a sweeter, refined flavor appropriate for the tea ceremony, while lower grades of matcha are best used in smoothies and cooking. Jacobs of Samovar preaches the good stuff at every turn: "You get what you pay for," he says. "Good matcha yields better body and more complex flavor. Customers can tell the difference and happily pay for it." Another way to build on health benefits is to offer organic matcha. DoMatcha started producing organic, ceremonial-grade matcha to meet customer demand, and it quickly became the company's best-selling tea in natural and health food stores.

If your shop requires a more contemporary flourish, consider



CHILLED: Matcha ice cream imparts the tea's flavor in dessert form.

using matcha to add a healthful, gourmet touch to food and drink, whether sweet or savory, hot or cold. Matcha Source's wholesale customers constantly develop new recipes: green tea panna cotta, matcha truffles, green tea basmati rice and matcha doughnuts, to

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ICED: Matcha icing is a subtle twist on regular frosting, giving it a more complex flavor and toning down the sugar.

name a few. An iced matcha lemonade is a refreshing tonic on a hot day. Another simple matcha recipe involves mixing a teaspoon of matcha into ice water with a twist of lemon: It's cooling, rich tasting and leaves a clean mouthfeel. Matcha also has a vibrant

life in tea cocktails: A matcha-tini is a bright, emerald-green concoction with a hearty antioxidant boost.

As TBar's popular lattes and smoothies have shown, matcha's chocolatey nuances pair well with milk, making it a fitting addition to smoothies, yogurt parfaits, lattes and ice creams. White of Matcha Source even sells a Matcha Latte Kit with a milk frother for creating lattes at home. Playing around with recipes and gadgets involved in the brewing process can help customers understand the beverage. If you have a matcha recipe idea, discuss it with your matcha vendor, White suggests. Vendors may have recipe suggestions or tips on the best way to highlight matcha's flavors.

Though the imaginations of consumers and sellers have recently influenced the forms of matcha, it's still powerful in its powdered form. "Matcha represents everything the tea experience stands for: slowing down, ritual and mindfulness," Jacobs says. Today, consumers can find the same relaxation, health and energy that Zen monks experienced centuries ago. And the matcha ritual can be personalized to fit their needs. The tea has spread "from mountaintop to countertop," White says.

Matcha's spread comes from its universal appeal. For some, it's the ultimate health drink. Others seek the serenity of the matcha ritual. Still others enjoy it as a gourmet addition to food and beverage. But whether consumed in a tea bowl or a martini glass, the matcha experience is timeless—and evolving. ☘

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