

An interview with key young people working to preserve the traditions of Yamecha, a brand of tea grown in Yame, Fukuoka, one of Japan's leading tea producing areas; A close look into their thoughts and feelings toward Yamecha.

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Yamecha is a well-known brand of tea and one of the famous Fukuoka products. The farmers are over 2000 dotted mainly in Yame City, Hirokawa Town, Chikugo City, Ukiha City, and Asakura City. Reiganji Temple, which stands in a local area called Okuyame, is said to be the birthplace of this brand of tea. Here at Reiganji Temple, visitors can learn more about the history of tea, a deeply rooted aspect of local Yame culture. Yame is counted among Japan's top tea producing regions due to its local geological features—most notably a mountainous central region that experiences drastic shifts in temperature. Depending on how it is grown and manufactured, even a single variety of tea plant can be used to produce a broad range of green teas, including sencha (middle-grade tea), kabusecha (mild tea grown screened from direct sunlight before picking), gyokuro (refined, high-grade tea), tencha (powdered tea for use in tea ceremonies; also known as matcha), and bancha (coarse tea).

Yame has a solid reputation for producing gyokuro-style refined tea, and tea farms here consistently produce the highest volume of gyokuro tea in Japan. In the Gyokuro Category of the annual National Tea Competition of Japan, Yame-grown gyokuro tea has won the Production Area Award for twenty-one consecutive years and the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Award in seven consecutive competitions, from the 68th to the 74th. This tea is very highly rated for its vivid green hue and mellow flavor, and Yame Dento Hon Gyokuro, the highest-quality brand of gyokuro tea grown in Yame, is produced with such remarkable craftsmanship that top chefs from around the world now recognize its superiority.

Since ancient times, when producing gyokuro, matcha, and similar varieties of tea, Yamecha farmers shield their tea plants from the sun using natural straw mats called "sumaki" until the harvest is complete. Very few regions in Japan preserve this old-fashioned, labor-intensive technique, which is another reason that Yamecha is so highly regarded.

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The Job of preserving the traditions and quality of famicena



Hoshino Village is the name of an area in Yame City that lies along the border with Oita Prefecture, and due to its elevation, this area is a particularly prosperous spot for tea production, even within Yame. I visited Hoshino Seichaen, a tea farm established in Hoshino Village in 1946, where tea farmers work to preserve ancient traditions and old-fashioned methods of tea cultivation in the modern age.

I was welcomed by Shinya Yamaguchi, who serves as managing director at Hoshino Seichaen. In contrast to his mild, gentle demeanor, Shinya is a three-time champion at the National Tea Competition of Japan, where the competitors' expertise in tea is put to the ultimate test, and at the age of thirty-two, this tea specialist became to youngest person in history to earn the title of "tenth-level tea master," the highest rank available. He is now forty-one years old and one of the few, talented, key people responsible for the future of Yamecha.

Shinya's main job is to receive tea leaves from growers, process the leaves at Hoshino Seichaen's processing facility, and deliver them to consumers. His most important role is as the tea quality-assurance inspector prior to product shipping, or when otherwise requested, and he was kind enough to give me a glimpse into some aspects of this process.



Shinya thoroughly observes and compares the weights, textures, fragrances, colors, and other features of the tea leaves in order to perceive and identify any differences that manifest, no matter how slight. Even tea leaves from the same grower can vary in color and aroma depending on soil quality, plant variety, preparation method, fertilization control, and the manufacturing or cultivation methods employed.



When tasting to determine a tea's fragrance and flavor, he makes use of a special spoon that he uses specifically for this purpose. When tasting many difference types of tea, such as at a competition, inspectors and judges only sip very small quantities, similar to wine tasting.



Since tea is graded on a point system, it is considered best to look for flaws when comparing. First, judges or inspectors sniff to see whether it has the 'distorted' aroma of oxidized tea or the 'bruised' smell of fresh leaves, then they check the color of the liquid. The final step is to take a sip to evaluate the tea overall, including its flavor, savoriness, and even the aroma that seeps up into the inspector's nose.

This delicate process is very dependent on one's senses, and I could not help but wonder if some sort of special training is required for inspectors to stay sharp and precise at all times. I asked Shinya about it, but he sidestepped the question a bit by saying, "I don't do anything special. If I had to come up with something, though, I would say that I make sure to avoid catching colds. Instead of trying to do something special, I just do my best to master the basics. I consider it important to make a habit of doing the simple, commonplace things in my daily life that I know I should." ...Which seems straightforward but is actually one of the most difficult things in the world to accomplish.

Visiting the next generation of leader



Next, Shinya took me to visit a tea farm named Hoshino Kirakuen, located about a ten-minute drive from Hoshino Seichaen, and he and I were given a tour of the magnificent tea fields there. We were shown around by Shota Tanaka, a tea grower roughly the same age as Shinya. Shota is also a leader who works to coordinate and unite the members of an association of young tea growers.



While showing us through his fields, Shota explained, "Over there, you can see a variety of tea known as 'yabukita,' the most popular variety in Japan. Over that way, you can see a variety called 'saemidori,' the star of Yame." Even areas within the same farm will vary in soil quality and sunlight, so even when cultivating the same variety of tea plant, the degree of growth depends on the climate and soil conditions. Plus, it takes several years for growers to select the optimal variety of tea plant and type of tea for the location in order to create a field, all the while considering production efficiency and market demand. I'm sure it takes far more time and effort than the rest of us can even imagine to divide up a farm to grow multiple varieties of tea at the same time.



The leaves, which harden during the winter, begin to bear buds from around March. Once they bud, growers disinfect and begin shading their crop from the sun for certain periods of time to protect the new buds as they grow. Then, over the course of two different time periods, they harvest the first and second tea crops. This process from cultivation to harvest does not usually vary from year to year, but no two days throughout the year are ever the same. Growers must keep a careful eye on the conditions in their fields, which change with the climate, in order to pick the tea leaves at the best possible time. So, in order to maximize the potential of the tea, Shota and other growers make sure to faithfully tend to their fields on a daily basis.

According to Shinya, "Without detailed calculations, it would be impossible to grow delicious tea. Growers need a broad range of knowledge because our skills are tested in many areas, up to an including processing the dried tea leaves at facilities for that. It's also important to remain agile and flexible, adapting to the times, because growers need to analyze the needs of the market and deliver tea that will satisfy customers. Growers have to be broad-minded, yet at the same time sensitive and meticulous." With respect, he added, "That's the kind of person that Shota is, and I think that his character is reflected in his tea."

On the whole, Yamecha farmers are aging, and the farming population itself continues to decline year by year. Which is why Shota and Shinya say they have taken the lead in organizing regular meetings where producers and others in the industry can interact with each other and exchange ideas. They hope that this will lead to building lateral relationships throughout the industry as well as lead to fostering other young growers in their twenties and thirties.



Shota said, "We are very grateful to Shinya for his professional and objective assessments of tea quality. Thanks to him, we are able to make improvements and set higher goals for the coming year." Manufacturers are able to produce better tasting tea by staying in close communication with growers and being aware of the conditions of their fields. Shinya, who sharpens his senses and heads out into the fields for this purpose, is the very picture of 'calm yet passionate.'

Both Shota and Shinya have complete trust in each other's knowledge and experience. Shota focuses all of his passion and desire into his fields, which Shinya then receives and passes on to consumers. In this way, the feelings and sentiments imbued into Yamecha flow out into the world from one person to another.

An expressive pioneer drawn into the world of tea



Suguru Tokubuchi is the owner of a tea shop named yorozu, located in Akasaka, a neighborhood in Fukuoka City's Chuo Ward. He became a pioneer roughly ten years ago when, in 2012, he became the first person in Fukuoka to open a shop specializing in both Japanese tea and sake.



Suguru, now a specialist in serving tea, took his first step into this world in his early twenties, when he was working as a bartender at a hotel in Tenjin, a prosperous area in downtown Fukuoka City. Through his job as a bartender, he met a man by the name of Shinichiro Ogata, CEO and art director for HIGASHIYA, an avant-garde Japanese confectionery shop that aims to convey the beauty of Japanese forms, designs, and styles. For Suguru, a bartender familiar with Western liquors and cocktails, Shinichiro's idea to reconstruct the value of the Japanese style by means of sake, shochu, and Japanese tea was nothing short of astonishing.

Ever since their encounter, Suguru has devoted himself to delving deeply into and expressing the beauty of tea and other aspects of Japanese style. He also says that meeting Shinya, the tea specialist at Hoshino Seichaen, helped him become even more deeply aware of the appeal of tea. At yorozu, you can enjoy the delicious flavor of gyokuro tea grown in Yame, which Shinya coordinates and supplies.



Suguru said, "I want my customers to be able to enjoy tea through all five senses, including the aroma of the tea leaves and the sound of hot water being drawn as it's brewed. Gyokuro tea is, after all, a journey into 'the first drop.' That first drop contains everything—history, traditions, the flavor of the land, and the emotions of everyone who helped make it. Nothing else is so dependent on preference and partiality, so when a customer orders a cup of gyokuro tea, I tense up in a good way—ready to do my best."



Brewed using water that is not quite so piping hot, that very first drop contains the condensed essence of the savory deliciousness of the tea leaves, and when you take a sip, your mouth fills with an intense aroma and flavor reminiscent of the feeling of waking up.

Then, as you squeeze out a few more drops and enjoy the gyokuro tea at different temperatures for your second and third servings, also known as the second and third "roasts," you are in for a treat unlike any you have ever before experienced.



Along with your Yame-grown gyokuro tea, you will also be served seasonal Japanese confectioneries. Depending on the time of year, the shop's menu features sweet delicacies such as Golden Seal Olive Oil Gelato, flavored with ripe olive oil and matcha tea powder produced in Hoshino Village. The sweetness of the confectioneries enhances the tea's aroma and flavor, and gives depth to the flavors of the second and third roasts.



Suguru said, "Shinya is the one who expresses the feelings and emotions of the growers, and my role is to take and interpret those sentiments so that I can express them to customers. I believe that the more people I convey those sentiments to, the more of a chain reaction I can cause."

The feelings and sentiments imbued into Yamecha and the people who work to express them... These connections transcend time and borders as they continue to reveal their value to us.

Craftman/Shop data





Shinya Yamaguchi

Managing director at Hoshino Seichaen, a tea producer in Hoshino Village, Fukuoka. Also, a tenth-level tea master and a Japanese tea instructor.

Hoshino Seichaen

8136-1 Hoshinomura, Yame City, Fukuoka Prefecture

https://www.hoshitea.com/

*Tours require a reservation. Please feel free to contact us.

Please be aware that tours and telephone reception are provided in Japanese only.

<Places to buy Hoshino seichaen green tea>

In Fukuoka City

Yame Honpo (a few minutes walk from the Tenjin Station's East Gate 12C)

Dokore (KITTE HAKATA 2F, next to JR Hakata station)

In Yame City

Yame Tourist Local Products Center Tokimeki



Suguru Tokubuchi

Opened the tea shop yorozu in 2012. Also, a member of SABOE, a general incorporated association that seeks to create new styles of tea shops in the modern age based on traditional Japanese culture.

yorozu

2-3-32 Akasaka, Chuo Ward, Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture http://www.yorozu-tea.jp/

Reiganji Temple, the birthplace of Yamecha

Said to be the spot where, roughly 600 years ago, Zen Priest Eirin Shuzui planted tea seeds he brought back from a pilgrimage to China and began teaching tea cultivation and production.

Produces tea as a young representative of Hoshino Kirakuen, inherited from his father.

Hoshino Kirakuen, Agricultural Corp.

10757-3 Hoshinomura, Yame City, Fukuoka Prefecture

<u>See map</u>

Google Maps may not display correctly if left open for more than 1 day

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