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Tea Sampling in Shuzuoka

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Mountains of tea at Shuzuoka Prefecture

I have visited many coffee lands and have passed a tea plantation or two in Uganda and in Indonesia; but to be enveloped by mountains of tea – north, east, west, and south – was overwhelming. This is the feeling one gets as you drive around Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan's leading production area for tea.

Shizuoka comprises about 40 per cent of Japan's tea production. I was fortunate to have been invited to a Multi-Country Observational Study Mission on Agricultural Practices Promoting Innovation and Productivity for Mass Media Practitioners. There were 17 delegates from 13 countries, mostly from Asian Productivity Organization (APO) member nations. We had co-delegates from tea-producing countries as well, but they too learned a new thing or two from our Shizuoka experience.

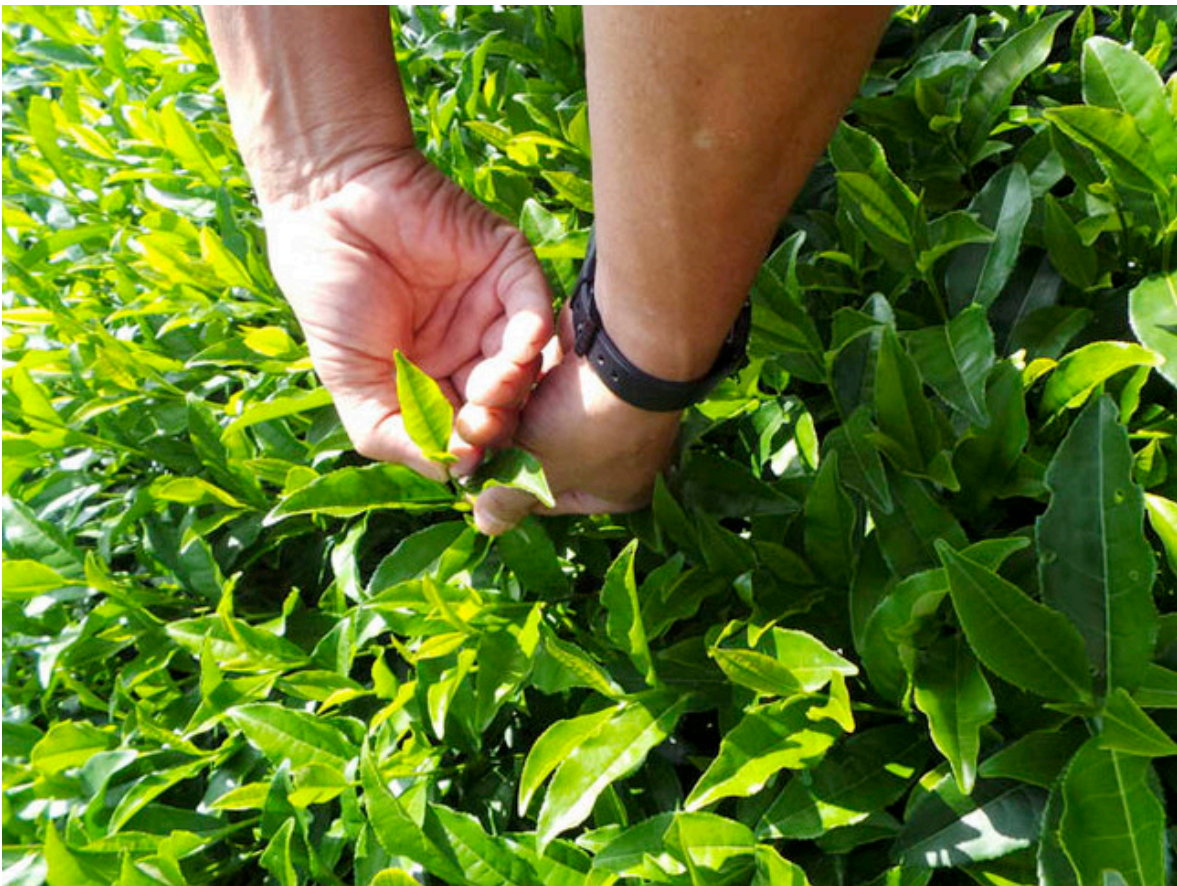


Moriuchi-san in his tea farm

We were met by Mr. Yoshio Moriuchi and he described the different tea varieties in his one farm, a 5,000-square metre area lot, just one of several he and his family own. His farm is on an elevated plane and is able to grow tea with thinner leaves that require less time to steam, to make into what we know as green tea.

Green tea is tea that is not fermented, while oolong tea is semi-fermented, and black tea is fermented. The first harvest of tea or the first “pick” is in April and tea farms in Shizuoka entertain groups for harvest tours of tea. Shizuoka is about 168 kilometres southeast of Tokyo and is reachable by Shinkansen, or the bullet train.

At the Moriuchi Farm, they grow the Yabukita variety of tea. Mr. Moriuchi was also taught by a Taiwanese national on how to process oolong tea for possible export to Taiwan, which has a high demand for oolong tea. He hires 15 to 20 workers during harvest time, but on other lean months, he simply goes around by himself to check on his tea farms.



Plucking the leaves

We walked a few hundred metres amidst farmhouses towards the Moriuchi tea processing area. Though a bit crowded in space, he is able to process his total tea harvest in this area. Just across is his little store, which could seat 20 or more, for a tea ceremony. Sweet rice cakes with sweet potato filling had been set with teapots and cups.



Amidst farmhouses in Shizuoka

We took off our shoes and sat on the tatami (grass mats) flooring of the elevated tea room. Each in squatting position, we were taught how to prepare tea:

First, pour hot water into the tea cups. Not so much to warm them but to lower the temperature of the "off the boil" water. Warming them also keeps the temperature of the poured tea, even for a few minutes.

Next, pour the hot water from the cups into the tea pot. Measure three portions (or two, depending on how many will drink) of tea into the pot and pour more hot water. Wait for one minute.

Green tea is best steeped at 80-degrees Celsius, not at 100-degrees or at boiling point. It is also best steeped 2-3 minutes before drinking.

We first tried the house special, the green Yabukita tea, hot. You could smell its freshness and its clean smell. It is a refreshing cup of tea best taken with the sweets.

Then, Mrs. Moriuchi gave us small glasses to try the same tea variety cold. This cold tea is also sold now in convenient teabags that you "cold brew" or steep in cold water for a few hours.



Downtown Shizuoka

After the enlightening tea ceremony, we headed to another processing place called Kinzaburo in downtown Shizuoka. Kinzaburo is owned and operated by a passionate third generation tea processor, Fusao Maeda. This is where tea in “aracha” form — leaves with dust and all — get cleaned up using sophisticated equipment, until it is refined and is ready for selling.

After a quick factory tour, Maeda-san leads us to a second floor tea tasting room (where customers are welcome) to taste about 14 to 15 varieties of tea – from cold brew, green to vanilla flavour-infused, and even latte! You choose from air pots and pitchers and take note of what you fancy. Once you have arrived at your choices, you can buy them to take home as loose tea or in teabags.



Kinzaburo shop and factory

This innovative entrepreneur also put up a baking section to make pastries, biscuits and other accompaniments for tea-drinking, freshly made on-premise. You can smell the aroma of cookies as you are choosing your tea box or tea package to take home. Green tea ice cream? He's got it too!

Maeda-san is a winner of the 2002 Tea Competition on Tokyo TV, which further inspired him to develop different kinds of tea variants — even a green tea with bergamot, which is my favorite. Earl Grey, but green.

One can find Kinzaburo by asking around in Shizuoka, or logging on to www.kinzaburo.com.