



Matcha Madness

This vivid green tea powder holds incredible internal and external benefits.

By Rachel Kossman

Nearly 1,400 years ago, the Chinese began to cultivate and brew green tea leaves. In these ancient times, tea leaves were steamed, dried and pulverized, then packed into brick-like molds so that the base of the staple beverage was more easily transportable. To brew a cup, a small chunk of the dried powder was simply pulled off and dissolved into hot water.

It was during China's Song Dynasty, around the 11th century, that Japanese Zen Buddhist monks adopted the practice of grinding green tea, and it wasn't long before the restorative drink became highly esteemed in Japan. The Japanese immediately recognized the health benefits of this pure form of green tea. The whole-body absorption of the ground leaves kept people awake and alert, providing lasting energy and mental acuity. It also served as an astonishing natural source of antioxidants. Soon, the Japanese began to grow and cultivate the sencha plant (*ryokucha* in Japanese), on which green tea leaves grow.

Today, we are still benefiting from the Chinese's

early discovery—we call it *matcha*. What distinguishes matcha from other green tea is that it's a pure, ground form of the green tea leaf, which is then mixed with liquid and ingested. Alternatively, a typical cup of green tea is brewed using dried green tea leaves, which are then removed and discarded.

"For consumers who don't know the difference, matcha can look almost like an instant tea," explains Babette Donaldson, author of *The Everything Healthy Tea Book* (F+W Media, Inc., 2014). "But the reason matcha offers so many health benefits is because the entire leaf is being consumed."

ALL THE BEST BENEFITS

Matcha contains about a quarter of the caffeine in a cup of coffee, and our bodies respond uniquely to the powder. "After drinking matcha, you feel instantly lifted," notes Eric Gower, founder and creative director of Breakaway Matcha (breakawaymatcha.com). "It's the best beverage—it tastes amazing and is so wonderful for you."

HERBAL HEALTH

This “lifted” feeling comes thanks to theanine, an amino acid found within the green tea leaf. Teas are one of the few natural sources that carry this rare compound, which passes through the brain’s barriers and bestows a sense of well-being. “When you feel better after you drink tea, it’s due to the theanine, which works in partnership with the caffeine,” explains Donaldson. “It functions the same way as serotonin—it makes you feel great, and increases focus in a controlled way, rather than creating a jittery effect.” In ancient Japan, samurai warriors frequently drank matcha before battle, because the drink would prepare their bodies for vigorous activity and sustain their energy.

Matcha is also extremely effective in curbing appetite: Although the powder contains fewer than 10 calories per serving, its amino acids help consumers feel satiated. “It’s great to drink before a meal, because you won’t eat as much,” says Gower.

The more obvious health benefit of matcha is the powder’s unparalleled antioxidant content. Various scales rank the levels of antioxidants in natural foods, and the most commonly used is the oxygen radical absorbance capacity, or ORAC. In nearly every case study, using ORAC or any other scale, matcha has been deemed one of the highest sources of antioxidants by close to 1,000 units per gram.

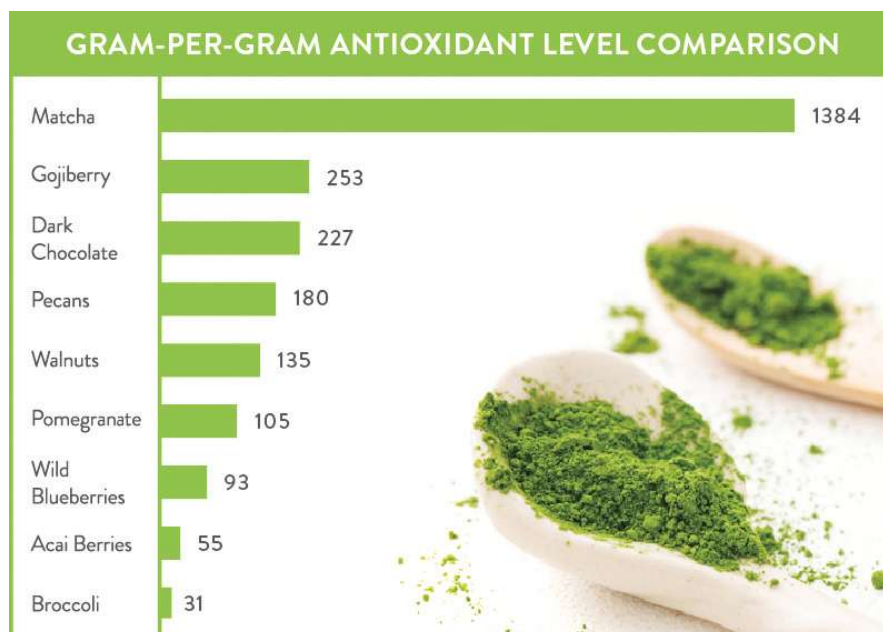
The packaged, stable state in which matcha is sold helps solidify its antioxidant value. “In general, fresh fruits and vegetables such as goji, spinach and blueberries still carry high antioxidant levels, but the amounts tend to fluctuate based on freshness and preparation,” clarifies Donaldson.



Matcha’s properties are also beneficial for the skin. “Green tea’s natural antioxidants protect the body from environmental factors and free radicals that can lead to accelerated aging,” explains M’lisa Jackson, president of M’lis. Green tea extract can be used around the eye area, because the caffeine and flavonoids are ideal for alleviating dark circles, or as an astringent ingredient in a facial. “Tea is also effective in the prevention and treatment of abnormal skin conditions, such as acne, psoriasis and eczema,” Jackson adds.

HEALTHY HARVESTING

The quality of the green tea leaf is what truly differentiates the highest quality matcha. Ryokucha plants are grown under intense supervision, and for the last two to four weeks before harvesting, they are shaded so the chlorophyll level in the leaves increases significantly. When the ryokucha is shaded, its leaves fall out to the sides and flatten as the plant works to seek as much sunshine as possible. These flat leaves are then plucked, the stems are peeled and the leaves steamed. “This stops the bright green leaves from losing their



Source: *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry*, “Lipophilic and Hydrophilic Antioxidant Capacities of Common Foods in the United States”

Quality Control

"For serious connoisseurs, matcha is consumed almost like wine," says Eric Gower, founder and creative director of Breakaway Matcha. "There's definitely a hierarchy to matcha, similar to that of wine country," concurs Babette Donaldson, author of *The Everything Healthy Tea Book*. The highest-quality, most recognized matchas are grown and ground meticulously in Japan. However, many producers of dubious credibility jumped on the bandwagon once they recognized the growing demand for matcha. To source the best matcha, consider these tips from experts Gower, Donaldson and Steve Schwartz, founder of Art of Tea:

"Avoid matcha that comes from China. The country's pollution, plus heavy metals in the soil and air, make their way into the tea leaves."—Gower

"The powder should be an absolutely brilliant green. It should look almost fake."

—Donaldson

"High-quality matcha will smell almost chocolatey. If the aroma is pond- or hay-like, leave it on the shelf."—Gower

"Because of tea's sensitivity to oxidization, make sure any packaging is airtight."—Schwartz

"The best matcha will be ground by hand, using artisan-carved granite wheels. If you throw the leaves into modern electrical grinders, you won't get the same quality."

—Gower

"Teas attract and hold water, so don't leave matcha powder sitting out in your humid spa environment. Make a batch and serve it in a pitcher, or find a company that packages single servings for your guests."—Donaldson



chlorophyll and oxidizing," says Donaldson. "And that's why the best matcha is such an intense color."

Lastly, the steamed leaves are ground into a fine powder and packaged immediately in airtight containers. Growers who produce premium batches of matcha only pluck "new leaf growth" once a year, in January, for their blends. Subsequent harvests of "old growth" leaves can take place up to four times a year and produce varying, lesser grades of matcha.

"Simply put, there's no such thing as inexpensive, high-quality matcha," says Gower. That said, you can purchase the powder cheaply by the pound, but keep in mind it will mostly likely be "culinary grade"—ground from a faster-growing varietal that's more bitter and intended for mixing with ingredients other than just water.

Which leads to the final question: hot or cold brew? With a cold brew, you can get away with a slightly lower-quality powder. "Molecules move faster in your mouth when they're hot, and our tongue picks up spices, astringency and bitterness more easily," notes Steve Schwartz, master tea blender and founder of Art of Tea (artoftea.com). "When molecules are cold, you're less sensitive to bitterness, and pick up sweetness instead."

"A bowl of hot matcha is ideal on a cold day," says Gower. "But if your clients are working out, rehydrating post-massage or relaxing in the steam room, a frothy glass of cold brew matcha could be just the ticket." ■

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