

History of Tea in Japan

The history of tea in Japan is very old. In 729 AD Emperor Shomu(聖武)served tea at a special Buddhist ceremony. However, from 815 AD it seems tea to be forgotten for about 400 years. In the 12th century a Buddhist priest named Eisai (栄西) brought tea seed from China to Japan. He may, therefore be cited as the founder of the Japanese tea industry. At first, the custom of drinking of tea was not associated with the common people. Tea was used as a kind of medicine and in upper social class affairs. Only after Senno-Rikyuu(千利休, 1521-1591) who accomplished the art of tea ceremony, the custom of tea drinking was conveyed from the upper classes to the society of Bushi(武士) and then gradually to the common people.



Picture of Matcha Making Process in old days



Old tea garden, planted seedlings



Origin of cultivar ' Yabukita '

With the opening of the Yokohama trading port in 1859, tea became a commodity of daily use. Production of tea increased rapidly to about 24 million kg by the closing year of the 19th century. Until then, tea leaves were rolled by hand, a tedious and time-consuming method(Temomi), which restricted the production. With the invention of machines for processing and mechanical shears for harvesting, tea production increased rapidly.

Until 1960, 90 % of tea plants were propagated from seeds. However, the new clonal cultivars have been selected and the technique of cutting established, thereafter the area of clonal tea field has increased gradually. Today, more than 90 % of tea fields in the main tea districts are clonal, and a cultivar known as ' Yabukita 'accounts for 86 % of the clonal cultivar.

The outlook of tea production in Japan is rather gloomy. Consumption, however, is looking up due to the recognition of the health benefits of tea. Taking all trends into account, the basic direction for the future tea industry in Japan is the production of high quality tea primarily for domestic consumption.