

BRAZILIAN TEA HISTORY

by Yuri Hayashi

Of the many tea producing countries in the world, one is still relatively unknown, one which has an intimate and historical connection with this drink. Despite its fragmented history, Brazil maintains a tradition of growing tea rooted in influence from the Orient and its early colonial period.

It is about this history that I would like to talk about today. As I always like to say: it's hard to just speak about tea without revealing its origins. A single cup of tea contains, not only a precious liquid, but a reflection of its cultural heritage and the supporting role it has played in the social and economic events shaping the history of nations.

Bellow I present the result of assembling a virtual jigsaw puzzle of information from extensive research derived from historical documents. This exclusive article unveils clues about the historical course of tea in Brazil, something few have explored.

Colonial Brazil and Chinese Tea

After the discovery of Brazil in 1500, Portugal began its colonization of these vast and productive lands. Over the following centuries, the presence of noble Europeans influenced Brazilian culture. And because of the awareness of tea's status as a delicacy, the Portuguese crown requested tea seeds and ordered manpower from China to be sent to Brazil. The final destination of these seeds was Rio de Janeiro and once delivered there, some of the seeds were sent to the city's Botanical Garden, serving as a field research and development station. Managed by Chinese immigrants, the Chinese cultivar settled extremely well in this new environment and thrived.

In 1822, Brazil gained its independence from Portugal after years of domestic and international turmoil. Dom Pedro I was Brazil's first Emperor and recognized the wealth of his new nation, with tea being a product of great value.

In 1824, a new director of the Rio's Botanical Garden was nominated, Frei Leandro do Sacramento. He was faced with a tea plantation that was virtually abandoned, with excessive growth and very few of the skilled Chinese field workers left to attend it — the majority of the Chinese community left for opportunities in local commerce, seeing it as more lucrative than farming.

Per the request of Dom Pedro I, Frei Leandro created detailed documents about tea plants and their cultivation to be sent out with tea seeds to those interested in growing them in other Brazilian provinces. With this, began a project aimed at spreading tea production and culture throughout the whole country, a potentially profitable endeavor at the time. Under this initiative and with the help of Frei Leandro, a plan was created which even included machinery's importation for tea production and the hiring of more personnel. With all these pieces in place, only an act of extreme misfortune could halt this plan from executing: the death of the Carmelite Frei Leandro do Sacramento in 1829.



Frei Leandro do Sacramento's tea manual

While all this was happening in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais also developed some tea plantations with seeds that were collected from Rio's Botanical Garden. However, due to the lack of tea processing knowledge, the growth of the coffee market and urban expansion, the culture of tea did not take deep roots in the states.



Tea brands from Minas Gerais (1930)

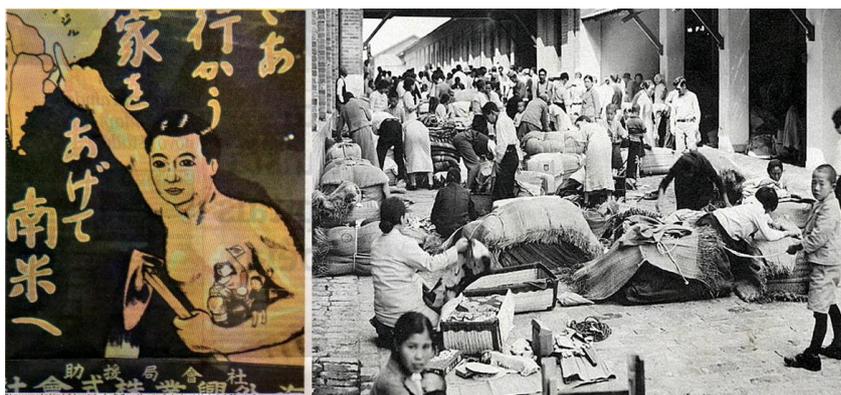
Despite these hindrances, Sao Paulo still managed to export 30 thousand kilos of tea around 1850. And in 1862, a tea sample from Baron de Camargo's treasurer's farm (in Minas Gerais) was sent to compete in the World's Fair Exposition in London, where it was the first Brazilian tea to ever be awarded.

Brazil as a republic and the Japanese immigration

In 1888, with the abolition of slavery, tea production virtually disappeared. It was only in the following century, with Brazil now being governed as a Republic that tea returned thanks to the help of foreigners which were originally brought in to labor with coffee. Coffee became a big industry in Brazil, however, with the ups and downs of the coffee industry, some of these foreign laborers saw tea as a way to supplement during the down years.

This was the case with the Japanese immigrants, starting in the 20th century. Many of them made the choice to leave their jobs in Japan to seek opportunities in an unknown country. However, adapting themselves to different foods, climate and a totally contrasting Brazilian

culture was not easy. This transition is difficult for most immigrants, but seemed especially true for the Japanese. They tried maintaining their Japanese culture by living in communities always assuming they would return to their homeland. However, with the slow acquisition of wealth and the devastating results of the Second World War, the Japanese immigrants gave up hope of returning home and instead focused their attention on objectives on Brazilian land, creating a better future for their families.



Japanese immigration in Brazil: advertising about Brazil for the Japanese (left) and the arrival of the Japanese immigrants in Brazil (right, credits: Museu Historico da Imigracao Japonesa, 1908)

During 1922, in a Vale do Ribeira's (Sao Paulo) Japanese immigrant community, Torazo Okamoto, a professional from the Japanese tea industry, brought tea plants to cultivate on his own land in Registro from the "Viaduto do Cha", an overpass in downtown Sao Paulo – originally a private farm with tea plantation. The tea cultivar was known as "Tea of China", and said to be ideal for green tea, a favorite among the Japanese. He first began with a small test production, enough to supply the local community. However, Torazo Okamoto knew he needed to work with black tea to trade in high volume with the western world. Investing in his plans, when he traveled to visit Japan, during his way back to Brazil, he committed a daring move by stepping off the ship when it stopped in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). He was aware of the existence of another plant variety there, known as "Tea of India", and Torazo got ahold of some seeds, hiding it inside a loaf of bread and smuggling it home. After nearly 2 months traveling back to Brazil, he arrived in Registro, not with seeds, but with small tea plants. That was the beginning of the golden era of tea in Brazil.

The success of the cultivar brought by Torazo Okamoto (*Camellia sinensis var. assamica*) can be attributed to the climate conditions experienced in the "Vale do Ribeira" as it is located in the Atlantic Forest; characterized by good humidity, high temperatures and adequate rain fall. This success led other immigrants in the area to also engage in tea production, eventually earning Registro the title of "Brazilian Tea Capital". Between the decades of 1950 and 1990, there were approximately 45 tea factories and several farms in the region. During that time, local black tea was exported to Latin America, Europe, and North America, using government subsidies and foreign capital.

However, as time passed, difficulties emerged. Some of the problems were politically related, such as in the 90s with a new presidential administration, a presidential impeachment and also the implementation of a new national currency, the Real. Others were more related to a lack of innovation and not staying abreast of new technology. Finally, the human factor cannot be overlooked, which includes the transition of the Japanese colonies into more conventional cities, bringing capitalism, new mindsets, and behaviors, deteriorating the once strong unity. The combination of these problems eventually dismantled the golden era of Brazil's national tea industry. The huge economic crisis and the massive decline in exports caused most of the tea factories to close, leaving only a few as time went by.

Today in the city of Registro, only one tea factory remains, belonging to the Amaya family, and two small tea farms, belonging to the Shimada family and Yamamaru family, producing small batches of artisanal tea. In the western part of the state of Sao Paulo, a branch from a Japanese company, Yamamotoyama, produces Japanese-style teas, primarily for export and it's still financially connected by their headquarters ever since the heydays of Brazilian tea.

Meet Brazilian Tea Producers

Amaya Teas

The Amaya family came to Brazil in 1919 made up by Shutekishi Amaya, Nao Amaya, and their sons Jorge, Helio and Antonio de Mello. Antonio had an impressive professional career as the first Japanese to obtain a medical degree in Brazil. He played an important part in establishing Hospital Santa Cruz in the city of Sao Paulo, and even worked at the Japanese Embassy. However, of the three boys, Antonio was also the driving force behind the family's tea production. With access to the Botanical Garden in Rio de Janeiro, he researched tea plants, and developed commercial interest in teas in a time when interest was still very low. As a result of Antonio's work developing tea culture, in 1936 his family launched "Cha Ypiranga", an artisanal tea produced in Registro (SP), and marketed primarily in Rio de Janeiro.



Amaya's Tea Farm during Registro's Tea Tour organized by Escola de Cha Embahu (2019)

Many things happened in the years following the family's first contact with tea farming and production, including equipment upgrades in an attempt to keep up with the market. In its early years, the Amaya farm was able to produce thousands of tons of tea. However, driven by

current demand, today the factory only produces half of it's capacity. During their worst times, the thought of closing their doors appeared, but with renewed vigor and dedication they reorganized to adapt to the current domestic and international markets.

Located in the Vale do Ribeira, the vast Amaya tea farm sits adjacent to the "Mata Atlantica" (Atlantic Forest: considered a World Heritage per UNESCO) and the river Ribeira de Iguape. With more than 80 years of tradition the Amaya Farm is one of the oldest family businesses of its type in Brazil.

Technical information

Amaya Teas makes non-orthodox style black tea, oolong tea, green tea, and also green tea powder. The farm's area is 290 hectares but only 72 hectares is cultivated (other 72 hectares are still abandoned) and they have 146 hectares as natural preservation area. The total production sums 90 t of final product per year. Until October of this year, their farm will receive the Brazilian organic certification, granted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply.

Their machinery is based on the VSTP system (Vertical Sniechowski Tea Processing), and includes some in-house customization. The tea is marketed in bulk via zip pouches and tea bags, for distribution in stores throughout the country.

More information can be found on their website: <https://chasamaya.com.br/>

Sitio Shimada

Mrs. Ume Shimada, is a charismatic 93 years old grandmother and has lived part of her life harvesting tea to be sold to and processed by nearby factories. However, when the tea market could no longer afford her product she made an important decision. Not wanting to lose her family's small tea farm, in 2014 she decided to start her own artisanal tea production. Assisted by Tomio Makiuchi, Ms. Ume created a small on-site black tea production facility.



Shimada's tea processing, during Registro's Tea Tour organized by Escola de Cha Embahu (2019)

We must also take this opportunity to give a word about Mr. Tomio Makiuchi who is not only a tea enthusiast, but somebody very dedicated to today's tea culture. In his house in Registro, among his many inventions, there is a mini black tea factory. This scale model factory can produce about 5kg of tea. And being the social visionary that he is, he teaches children about tea production as a way to not only create new opportunities, but inspire the next generation of tea enthusiasts with the hope of seeing tea production return to the region and bring back the economic stability of the past.

The equipment found in the Shimada family's facility was refurbished by Mr. Tomio Makiuchi. Those machines are as old as the tradition of tea in the city. Mrs. Ume's daughter, Terezinha Shimada, learned (and perfected) the art of processing tea from Mr. Tomio: today she is responsible for the artisanal production of the tea harvested on their own property while other members of the family assist in other areas of the business.

Technical information

The teas produced by the Shimada family (white tea, black tea, and green tea) are known as "Obatian, o cha da vovo" (おばあ, grandma's tea) and was named in honor of Mrs. Ume. The black tea is artisanally made using the orthodox style on refurbished equipment used for tea rolling and drying, plus a wood oven for fixing.

The Shimada tea farm sits on 12 acres of land and is divided in 2 distinct areas, one of them being close to a lychee plantation which contributes to a special terroir in the tea. Annual production is estimated to be approximately 400 kilograms but due to the demand, they are producing only half of the total.

Their farm has the Brazilian organic certification, granted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply.

More information can be found on their website: www.sitioshimada.com.br.

Sitio Yamamaru

The Yamamaru family has a long relationship with tea. They came to Brazil in 1953 and acquired the land which is the starting point of their actual artisanal tea production. Mitsutoshi Yamamaru, the family's patriarch, was a very skillful Japanese architecture's carpenter with tight working schedules. For this reason, he left his son Kazutoshi in charge of the family's tea production.

In 1992, the tea farm had 20 acres and 7 employees working and living with the families at Yamamaru's farm when the tea crisis happened in Brazil. Even though the production was handed to bigger factories in the region, the family had to stop it due to the lack of market. Most of the lands and machinery were rented at this time. It was only in 2008 that they got the land back. In 2011, Kazutoshi started to recover the abandoned tea plantation. Since a whole forest had grown and surrounded the tea plants, an agroforestry system had to be implemented and other cultures (like palm heart) were introduced. Miriam, Kazutoshi's sister, went to Japan in 2017 and learned how to hand process Japanese tea. When



Yamamaru's agroforest tea plantation, during Registro's Tea Tour organized by Escola de Cha Embahu (2019)

she came back, the family adapted this system for a simplified version and started to produce artisanal green tea.

Technical information

Today, the Yamamaru's family produces artisanal green tea and black tea on a very low scale. They have almost 30 acres of agroforest tea that produced 30 kg of green tea in 2019. This year, they'll have a total of 60 kg of green tea, plus 5 kg of black tea. The intention is to keep scaling up following the demand in our market. They still have abandoned tea fields on their property.

Yamamotoyama do Brasil

Yamamotoyama is a traditional Japanese tea company, created in 1690. They came to Brazil in 1970 moved by the open tea market of that time, driven by Kuniichiro Yamamoto, president of the 9th generation of the company. He wanted to offer good quality tea to the world and, pursuing this vision, he found in Sao Miguel Arcanjo (inside the state of Sao Paulo) the perfect conditions for growing Japanese-style tea. The Japanese tea cultivar Yabukita, plus Japanese machinery, was brought to achieve Kuniichiro plans.



Yamamotoyama's factory in Sao Paulo (2017)

Technical information

Today, Yamamotoyama do Brasil has a total of 104,25 hectares of tea fields, producing 1.530 metric tons of raw leaves per year. They have Japanese-style green tea (shincha, sencha, bancha, genmaicha, hojicha), white tea and organic green tea. The majority of the production is exported.

Brazil Today and Specialty Tea Culture

Following the golden era of Brazilian tea, the national industry survived timidly serving the small domestic market. Historically, the Brazilian's preferred choice is coffee, with yerba mate and other botanical teas coming after. Pure tea has never pleased the Brazilian palate, being mostly enjoyed by the eastern communities in the country.

Fortunately, in the last decade, a new market has appeared thanks to an increasing interest in specialty teas and also the awareness and need of greater health care these days. This renewed interest has sparked business opportunities, creating new brands and attracting

attention from international companies. The majority of these brands works with imported products and has invested in tea education such as tasting events – a must in order to fully experience their product’s quality.

I have been involved in tea research since 2007 and have provided classes since 2013. Gauging from my experience I see a market still in growth. This path of expansion is disorderly and varied, but one that will not retrace its steps back as it gains the appreciation of Brazilian’s evolving taste.

In 2014, delighted with all its details and history, I started becoming more involved with national teas. Moreover, I was saddened to realize that Brazilian teas were not being properly valued. Today, we can see how things changed: Brazilian special tea market (including herbal teas) grew 25% between 2013 and 2018. And the franchises growth in the last two years got at least 37% rate. This movement of expansion is also present in popular teas (ready to drink and tea bag).

In a series of projects aiming at providing knowledge to tea enthusiasts, this article about the history of tea in Brazil has been created to be shared, inviting you to a better understanding of this culture in our tropical lands. And through Escola de Cha Embahu – Tea School, I also provide the Tea Specialist formation for the ones interested in the area, being the first tea education institution in Brazil. Our mission is to spread accessible knowledge about tea, bringing consciousness to its rich culture, philosophy, and sensory experience. We also stimulate the market through events, contests and actions aimed at the development of our country’s tea market as a whole.



Escola de Cha Embahu´s tea classes (2020)