

Something's brewing in United Arab Emirates (UAE)

What is UAE drinking?

Imagine you've just landed in UAE. It feels like a foreign land, unfamiliar and yet welcoming, beautifully nestled between ancient deserts and the most astonishing buildings that modern architecture can offer. You're invited to a local's house: what would your first drink be?

Served in small cups along with dates in an ornate coffee pot vessel called Dallah, Arabic coffee (or Gahwa) is UAE's welcome drink. The old Bedouins used this ritual of coffee preparation, often added with spices, as a sign of hospitality, wealth, and generosity. With its very early influence from Yemen, used by Sufi's monasteries in the 15th century to keep themselves alert (*we're reminded of Matcha's origins with the Zen Monks*), the spread of coffee expanded in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, the Dallah plays such an essential role in the Gulf countries, that it's featured in several public artworks and even the UAE one dirham coin.



Coffee pot vessel, Dallah



Karak Chai

While coffee has its historical roots in the region as the reign of drinks; tea has also gained immense popularity in UAE—specifically the addictive 'Karak chai.' This is probably the most consumed beverage in UAE and a daily necessity for some. It's tasty, accessible, and very affordable starting from just a humble 1 dirhams or 30 JPY for a cup. It's a comfort drink made with strong black tea and evaporated milk with spices, varying from cardamom pods, cinnamon, ginger, a pinch of saffron, and sugar. It is not the traditional tea that you may be accustomed to at home, but it's similar to Indian Masala Chai with fewer spices. Dare we say that some cafes add caramelized biscuits or even chocolate éclair for that added sweetness.

Karak tea drink made its way to the GCC from the Indian diaspora in the 1960s, when oil was being discovered in the Gulf region. Soon, roadside cafes started serving it, gaining local popularity with their secret variation in the recipe. Many cars are parked outside cafés ordering their cup, delivered directly to the car. Some sit in their cars, enjoying tea silently while scrolling through their phones. Others huddle around the parking lot area and chat over the cups. It's the urban culture born out of regional influences. But is it the tea culture?

What's the tea landscape?

While Karak chai is here to stay despite its high sugar content, tea options are slowly becoming more available in the market, from pure loose leaves to flavored tea bags. Black teas, flavored Earl Greys, and English Breakfasts still dominate the market; however, the recent pandemic has shown demand and growth for healthier options, along with functional foods and drinks that boost immunity with antioxidant properties.

"We expect black tea to grow at 3.1 percent over the next five years. Green tea will grow at 2.4 percent and herbal and traditional medicinal teas will post a growth of 2.8 percent."

-James George, Senior Analyst, Euromonitor International

UAE is a big importer of tea, with over 83,000 tonnes imported annually [1], and about 15, 500 tonnes consumed in a year. [2]

The country is home to over 200 different nationalities, and its diverse cultural demographics are very much reflected in its vibrant food scene. It truly is a culinary melting pot. With so many influences and preferences, restaurants in UAE offer different regional teas in their menus, especially flavored teas, such as the robust and brisk Turkish Black teas, Moroccan Mint (made with Greenpowder tea and fresh mint), Chinese Jasmine Dragon Pearls, to the Instagrammable color-changing Butterfly Pea teas.

As consumers and residents have vast and different tea knowledge, experiences and preferences, finding new teas in UAE can be a constant exploration beyond the usual commercial shops and supermarkets. "There are a few specialty tea shops, but quality and character will differ from vendor to vendor." – Mohammed A.

At the moment, there are very few artisanal loose-leaf teas for the discerning tea drinkers and the connoisseurs. But what about Japanese Green Teas and Matcha? Where do Japanese teas stand in the UAE landscape?

The rise of green goodness Matcha and underground tea culture

Having hosted many private guided Tea Tasting sessions in Abu Dhabi and Dubai for the past few years; we've come to realize that many people in UAE are still discovering artisan loose leaf teas and their varieties.

Many are shocked and surprised at how incredibly flavorful natural pure tea can taste without being perfumed, scented, or artificially flavored. This is obviously music to our ears.

There's been an increasing interest and curiosity for premium quality teas and the stories behind them--from the growers who carry on ancient traditions, to the origin, all the way to how tea is produced. Many UAE residents are keen to learn and explore more about Japanese tea varieties and brewing methods. The main driver for this curiosity seems to be the health benefits that consumers expect in Green tea, especially when it comes to Japanese teas and Matcha due to their superfood qualities.



Tasting a variety of Spring teas

The second driver is taste. However, based on our survey and interview results, we've had a varying response in the market. Some consumers are already accustomed to Japanese teas and their pleasant savory umami taste. For them, there's a genuine appreciation behind the tea and yearning to discover more:

"I like Gyokuro for relaxation, just appreciating the aroma, taste, and mouthfeel. Kukicha is nice because of the clean mineral notes and the feeling of getting your calcium in, a good daily tea. Matcha iri Genmaicha is always nice, both green and toasty," says Mohammed A.

Hojicha is my favorite, it is smoky, and I can picture myself drinking it at the edge of the woods, it's wild, and Oh so good! However, good ones are hard to find." – Kim M.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, a considerable majority of respondents believe that there's still a need, as well as an opportunity, for Japanese tea exposure in the market:

"There are 'still very limited options and lower grade qualities' in the market" – Derya.

Chef Priyal M. adds, "I've never had the chance to try many, and there aren't many options in restaurants."

Sora M. further adds, "There is not much Japanese tea in the market. There are but not many and also is not from Japan."

"Japanese tea lovers who know the quality, purchase directly from their favorite shop (overseas in Japan)," says Michiyosan.



Matcha workshop & Blind Tasting session, Dubai

While this may sound all doom and gloom, the great news is that many consumers are interested to learn more and attend Japanese Tea events like: Matcha workshops, Chanoyu Tea Ceremonies, Ikebana, and Japanese Green Tea cooking.

In fact, in the past few years, there's been a rise in restaurant offerings from authentic Japanese cuisine to fusion dishes, ranging from take-outs, hidden gems, two-hour omakase, to fine dining Michelin star blowout. There's no doubt that Japanese cuisine is thriving. Eating out is basically a must-social activity here in UAE, and it's the best way to get exposed to new dishes, ingredients, and products, especially for local Emiratis and expats who have yet to visit Japan. Hojicha may have been a foreign term for some, but when it's served as gelato, it's a great way to get acquainted with the tea and its taste profile.

Matcha itself is slightly a different story. Matcha in UAE is gaining more presence and popularity than other Japanese teas. We're seeing a rise in Matcha Inspired-Cafes both in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and more cafes serving Matcha-infused food, pastries, and bubble tea.



Matcha avocado with Matcha granola

During our Matcha Tutorial workshops, many are keen to learn more about this green goodness, the different qualities, and how to prepare them at home without all the traditional teaware. Some consumers enjoy the taste immediately, while others find it an acquired one. From our honest conversations with tea drinkers, their perception of Matcha was tainted by their previous drink experience.

"I found it bitter, grassy, and...intense making it difficult to adapt to the taste." – Lamyia S.

Sadly, this may be the case for a handful of consumers. It's a shame how lower grade qualities can really taint one's perception, making it difficult to reverse for first time drinkers. This is why it's paramount to provide constant awareness and education about identifying quality Matcha.

This has been and will be an ongoing activity for us. We have found that consumers who have been exposed to basic knowledge of Japanese teas through guided experiences and tea tasting events are much more likely to fall in love with the tea and start to consume it regularly.

Through our exploration of existing Japanese tea knowledge and players in UAE, we've also come



to discover pockets of small private gatherings that are happily happening in various homes—like the Urasenke chanoyu tea-making procedures (temae), promoting the tea ceremony principles. This felt like meeting our soul tribe, as Mariko Dedousi-Ando, (a Tea Ceremony, Sogetsu Flower Arrangement and Japanese language teacher) invited us to her home, along with Sora Muratova and Michiyo Chiba (Japanese Tea Advisor, and Managing Director of Sakura Sweets and Restaurant).

Left to Right: Yvettesan, Marikosan, Sorasan and Michiyosan

Since our encounter, it's been a wealth of knowledge and passion sharing from Matcha to home-cooked meals, to Kimono sessions. During their tea ceremony, we felt as we'd been transported back in a forgotten element. UAE felt so far, and yet so close to all our visits to Japan.



Sora Muratova

When you sit down to receive a bowl of tea and drink it with full appreciation, respect nature, feel the seasons, the heart of the host, the hearts of the other guests, it creates a beautiful and pure moment. It helps us to remember what's most important in life. With this experience, we can only hope to share more of it with UAE.



For the love of matcha with Marikosan



Marikosan performing Chanoyu

Marikosan has been a guiding light and a constant inspiration. "I have been teaching the Japanese language to foreigners since 1986...when I came here in Dubai (year 2005), I met a Japanese lady teaching tea ceremony, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to know more about Japanese culture as I found out that you can see the art of Japanese culture concentrated in the way of tea. I am happy knowing the profound meaning of the way of tea. I have been practicing now for more than 10 years, and I will keep doing to enjoy the beauty of the universe, which can be found in the way of tea. I would like to share this experience with my beloved friends as long as I live."

Post covid restrictions, Tea Awareness is looking very promising in 2022. "Many people are interested in tea ceremony practice and learning how to prepare the Matcha tea, also Japanese Language and culture," says Sorasan.



Honoring H.H. Sheikh Mohammed's three fingers salute.

What we have learned

Spreading the tea culture and awareness has been our primary goal for yv et té—from collaborative events to Matcha workshops, various Tasting exercises, and cultural activities. When it comes to Japanese tea specifically, creating awareness and appreciation can come from the Japanese community living in UAE, as well as those who are genuinely in love with it—from chefs, entrepreneurs, teachers—basically anyone with a passion.

Tea after all, is more than just a hot beverage. It's comfort; it's an escape; it also brings us together. While Japanese tea may still be at a very grassroots, infancy level, we're feeling very motivated with the direction it's heading.

With the support and knowledge access of the World Green Tea Association, we're grateful to be a part of this quest and hope to spread more awareness in UAE.



Tea & skincare session, Dubai



Tea tasting & Yoga, Abu Dhabi

Coming from a country with deep coffee origins, UAE as a young country has embraced us all, with its thirst for curiosity, flavors, and infusions. So, what's brewing in UAE? We reckon a Hojicha-Karak Chai infusion with spices. It makes a great marriage blend between the two countries. What cha think?



Standing tall in Jumeirah Beach, Dubai

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