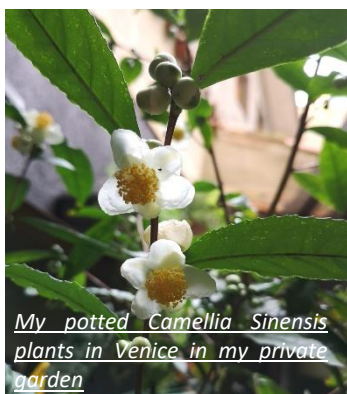


TO BE A TEA SOMMELIER IN ITALY

One thing that cannot be said of Italy is that it has a true “tea culture”, because tea is neither produced nor cultivated here, and the few existing plantations are so small they can only be considered on a purely amateur level. Furthermore, Italy has an extremely rich food and



My potted Camellia Sinensis plants in Venice in my private garden

wine tradition and the quality of local wine, olive oil, cheese and food production in general is very high and internationally renowned. Italians are traditionally great consumers of coffee, and coffee lovers often tend to not drink tea. All these



During one of my Tea Sommelier Courses in Venice in the Londra Palace Hotel

contributing factors explain why the little that is known about tea in Italy can be mainly attributed to the diffusion of factory-produced black tea bags in recent history, from the 1930’s onwards, along with the popular Western versions of flavoured teas.

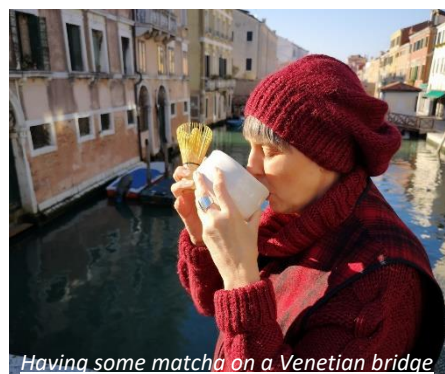


Chinese blooming tea, Russian Lomonosov tea cup, Japanese tea caddy

The use of tea, in the imagination of the older Italian generations, is still typically associated with times of illness, and tea is conceived simply as a remedy for indigestion, colds and flus or general states of sickness. Many people also use tea for its health and beauty properties, in slimming diets, for skin and hair care, but without a true awareness of the most suitable products to choose in order to obtain such benefits.



In this regard, in the last few years Matcha Tea has become very fashionable, also for use in food production. For this reason, tins of very cheap so-called “matcha” tea powder have flooded the Italian market and are bought mainly for the production of cakes or flavoured milk-based drinks. The vast majority of Italian people know nothing about tea, or about matcha: they often ignore that it should only ever come from Japan, and they cannot tell the difference between an original Japanese matcha and a cheap non-original one.



Having some matcha on a Venetian bridge



Tiramisù and shortbreads in the Matcha version

It must be said however that original Matcha is being promoted more and more by the field experts who, through researching and only selling “Specialty” products in their shops, are gradually educating the Italians (already used to high quality food and wine produce) about the difference between an authentic Matcha and a low-quality commercial one.

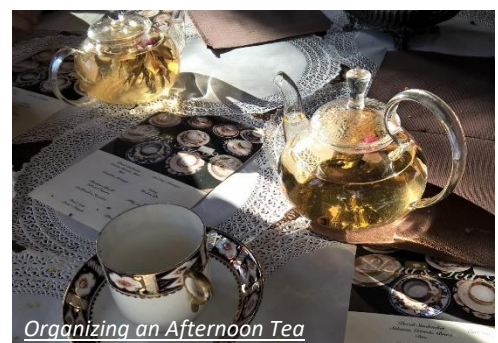


A lesson about Japanese teas with British contamination. Matcha scones topped with black sesame seeds and filled with cream cheese and smoked salmon

This also goes for all the other varieties of Japanese tea, and those originating in other production areas of the world such as China and Taiwan, or India. The profession of Tea Sommelier is still largely unknown in Italy. Every time I tell someone what I do for a living, they are surprised as they have never met a Tea Sommelier before, despite the fact that in Italy we have a consolidated tradition of wine, olive oil, water, beer Sommeliers and more. Even the most important hotel chains, of which there are many in Italy, struggle to understand the role of a Tea Sommelier, and often fail to provide the most basic training to their staff in this field. Tea remains largely unknown as a result, both culturally and as far as the correct preparation procedures are concerned, which explains why it is almost impossible to drink a decent tea anywhere in Italy.

The younger generations of Italians, however, have been growing up in closer contact with Japanese culture thanks to the “Manga” and

“Anime” phenomenon, which have given them a certain knowledge of Japanese culture and social norms that was lacking in the older generations. As a consequence, today Japanese culture is very appealing to the eyes of young Italians, and being part of it, tea has also become interesting per sé and not just as something that is “good



Organizing an Afternoon Tea

for our health". The Oriental Languages Universities in Italy have also produced generations of people who study oriental cultures and who have travelled, and often lived, in some Asian countries, thus coming into contact with common Asian customs including the use of tea, but a tea that is completely different from the one they knew back home. This has helped steer tea consumers towards more discerning choices.

It must be said, however, that in Italy tea is still mainly seen as an integral part of the British tradition, with the allure of its quaintly decorated China tea sets, lace, and tea cakes, damask velvet armchairs and bizarre little hats.



Me during an Afternoon Tea in Asolo at the Albergo al Sole where the actrice Eleonora Duse used to live



A tea class about Japanese teas with different Japanese style sweets matching each tea

As far as Japanese tea is concerned, the image Italians have is by contrast one of rigour, slow tranquility, and minimalism, of painstaking care and beauty in every detail, of a ritual where nothing is left to chance. Japanese tea is perceived as something exotic, pure and supremely elegant, at times almost inaccessible.

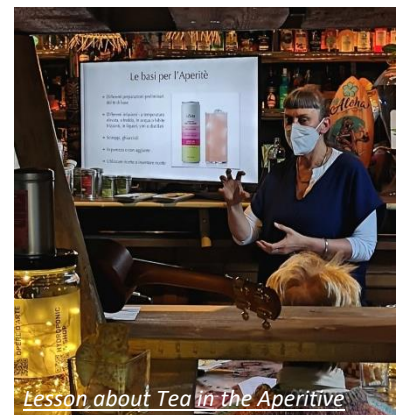
Compared to British tea culture, the Japanese one is harder to understand and the subtle differences in purity between the different types of green tea are

less immediate if compared to more accessible flavoured teas such as the universally known Earl Grey or morning blends like the English Breakfast. Furthermore, In Italy it is common practice to add some milk, or more frequently lemon and sugar. The delicate, elegant, and pricey Chinese and Japanese teas remain the prerogative of a small niche of enthusiasts, who often become true tea nerds.

In the past decades a few schools have opened in Italy to spread the knowledge of tea culture. I myself qualified as a Tea Sommelier with the UK Tea Academy in London and am now a licensed Tutor in Italy with my Ar-Tea Academy. UKTA Licensed Tutors can be found in many other countries, Japan being one of them, and also Spain, France, South Korea, and Germany.



Two happy baristas with their "Tea Guide" UKTA Certificate in the Bistrò and Art Gallery "Cantiere Art District in Italy



Lesson about Tea in the Aperitivo

During the UKTA certified courses, I teach in Italian, I divulge tea culture at different levels, starting with its history, through to its geography, chemistry, botanic, and the illustration

of the different manufacturing methods for each different tea variety. I also hold courses in Sensory and brewing techniques, where I teach the correct parameters and the use of culturally diverse accessories. Lastly, I move on to the next level where I teach about the most representative teas from each producing country in the world, their tasting techniques, the different terroirs, and their specific manufacturing methods.



Students making note during a lesson



My and some students during a UKTA "Tea Sommelier" class

My courses are held both in person in Venice and on-line, where I taste with my students the teas that are sent directly to their home along with professional tasting kits. This system allows many more people to take part, making it easier for me to divulge tea culture.

Some schools of Chanoyu, Ikebana and Kintsugi have also opened in Italy, along with tea shops and tea rooms run by Italian, Japanese or Chinese professionals, enthusiasts, and experts, who share with their clients the immensely fascinating world of tea. Year after year, more and more books and magazines are being published about tea in general and more specifically about Japanese tea, but unfortunately very little exists in Italian and the English language remains the only alternative to the original texts.



We should not forget the work of some Japanese producers who have openly reached out to the West through tea clubs, themed courses, on-line meetings, and internships, thus promoting closeness and knowledge. A good example is the Global Japanese Tea Association with its Summer 2021 Tea Marathon, organized at the same time as the Olympics and which saw also many Italians take part. This initiative put producers in touch with new potential clients all over the world and Italy responded very well. In recent years, some producers have opened their homes,



During my stay with the lovely Oyama Family in Higashi Sonogi

welcoming tea tourists within their families, and this is a priceless experience that my husband and I personally enjoyed in 2018 when we stayed with the Oyama and Nakayama families at Higashi Sonogi, in the Nagasaki District.



Yoshitaka Oyama teaching me about his special Tamaryokucha production

Our trip then moved north touching the most important locations, such as Kyoto, where I visited the Obubu Tea Farm, and then Kakegawa City where we met the people from Maruyama Tea,

who accompanied us on a visit to the beautiful Tea Museum and to their manufacturing plant. But it was thanks to the invaluable help of the World Green Tea Association that, during this trip, we were able to make the right contacts and overcome the language barrier. We met at their Shizuoka premises, where we took part in the tea course offered to visitors and received guidance on the most significant tea locations to visit during our short stay. I am proud to have become a Special Member from that moment on. We then left for Tokyo where we encountered tradition and experimentation. One of the places I chose to visit for its cutting-edge offerings is the “Sakurai Tea Experience”, but many other places have also been a great source of inspiration for me.

During our tea trip in Japan, we found everywhere a very open attitude, kindness and help from the producers, the associations, and the shop owners, who despite the language barrier assisted us in understanding Japanese tea culture. I hope producers everywhere in the world follow Japan’s example of dedication and sharing, because for western countries lacking a tea culture like Italy, gaining knowledge and understanding is necessary in order to adequately purchase and prepare the marvelous teas that are produced all over the world.

To be a Tea Sommelier in Italy is still to be a rare bird. The vast majority of people do not even know such a job exists, and despite the great number of wine sommeliers, the public still has a hard time understanding what a Tea Sommelier does. Even the language of a Tea Sommelier in Italian is still a work in progress, in the effort to precisely translate all the nuanced meanings encoded in the Japanese, Chinese and even British tea jargons, often untranslatable and therefore kept in their original form. In Italy, and in other European countries such as France, we have a precise terminology in wine sommelier, which we are adopting and adapting to the world of tea, such as for instance the term “terroir”, which defines the “flavour of a place”; or the English term “cultivar” (a contraction of “Cultivated Variety”) which defines all the new varieties man-produced in a laboratory.

The Tea Sommelier profession is innovative and very few of us practice it in Italy. We do it with great effort and invest all our time and money trying to build up the role and create a fertile ground for our compatriots, teaching about authentic tea culture in the world, which for centuries has been the prerogative of another continent, Asia.



My students’ reaction is of surprise and almost always they are captivated and fascinated by the vastness and richness of this culture, which they did not know existed. It is my impression that many enthusiasts approach tea courses expecting to learn about the different varieties of flavoured teas they know from experience, but once they realize the reality is very different, a door opens for them onto an unknown and unexpected universe. From that moment there is no going back and they all start drinking in a different way, seeking out and researching authentic tea all over the world. Japanese tea is always very popular and its potential on the Italian market is very high, but in order to be fully understood it must go hand in hand with training and education on the correct preparation methods.

The World Green Tea Association helped me greatly by allowing me to write this article about the reality of tea in Italy. This is very important and could increase the bond between our two countries, acting as a bridge for students of Italian tea schools wishing to go on tea trips, helping teachers

receive suitable training through on-line courses, increasing the availability of technical textbooks for sommeliers in languages we can understand such as English, and the possibility of buying suitable teas for education and training purposes.

Ar-Tea Academy's and UK Tea Academy's customers across the world are oftentimes shop owners or tea room owners, or future professionals who are training with a view to starting their own business. Mutual cooperation could therefore be very fruitful for the correct divulgation of Japanese tea culture and to facilitate the connection between producers and foreign consumers. Understanding the apparently "simple" but in reality very complex Japanese tea culture needs time and a direct contact with those who sink their hands in the soil and smell the leaves as they are being processed, who really see the different colour nuances of the different cultivars, who smell the Camellia Sinensis in the wind, who only have a few years and even fewer opportunities in a lifetime in order to understand how to do better next time, crop after crop, season after season, how to deal with climate changes and all the unforeseen adversities in order to keep this delicate and precious tea cultivation and culture alive.

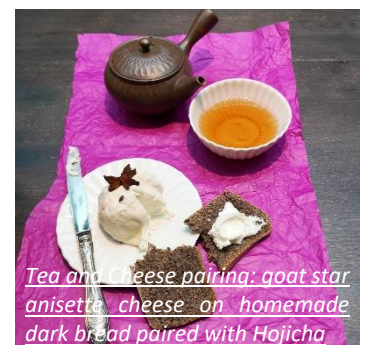
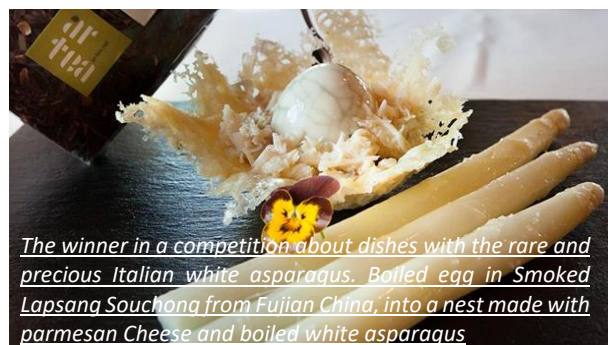
In Italy we are sufficiently educated and accustomed to beauty, our palate naturally honed by high quality food, to be able to understand, if only we could find a way to somehow speed up this slow and very costly process.



Tea consumption has grown exponentially in the last two years as a result of the pandemic, which made people more willing to consume natural products that are beneficial for one's health. On-line shopping also has become much more widespread, abating international barriers.

The UK Tea Academy is doing a marvelous job of providing international training, it is a constantly evolving reality and I am truly honored to be part of it. I devote all my energies every day to studying the different tea cultures and to tasting hundreds of teas from all over the world, so that I can give my students detailed and accurate first-hand information. Some Tea Lovers Associations are also appearing in Italy, many created by my ex-students and I must say they are doing a fantastic job!

To conclude, tea culture as a professional opportunity in Italy is growing and I honestly think that this is the right time to shift gears and go to the next level as far as the quality and quantity of commercial and training



options are concerned. The economic crisis saw many businesses close their doors across the country, and there is a great need to reopen them in style.



A punch cocktail made with Earl Grey tea and orange



Me preparing Sparkling Teas to taste

The Italian catering sector is very advanced and, just like in other countries, tea is becoming more and more often an ingredient in the kitchens of starred restaurants. Japan, for us Italians, has always been and continues to be an aspirational example of highly refined cuisine, of extreme elegance in presentation and in the use of accessories and precious, unusual ingredients, tea being one of them.

The world of mixology in Italy is very fashionable, and tea, especially Japanese tea, is finding its way into the shakers and glasses of the most famous Italian bartenders, even in competitions and during the various Fashion, Design or Cocktail Weeks which move the flow of international creativity in cities like Milan, Venice, Rome, and Florence.

I personally collaborated as a Tea Sommelier in the creation of “Tea based” events for important Italian fashion houses such as Prada and Peserico, or for design companies such as KANZ. Here I tried to present tea under a different light, making it more suitable to the Italian tradition of “aperitivo”. The results were truly surprising and extremely well received by the many elegant and sophisticated guests attending the new collection shows.



Me during an event in the Miu Miu Prada Store in Turin Italy

I must admit that, on such occasions, my attire was often Japan-inspired as I wore one of my treasured vintages *Haori*. Amongst my dearest friends are *Senyo*, who in her spare time teaches Chanoyu; *Lydia*, who with great passion collects precious *Kimono* and teaches about them; *Silvia*, a Japanese History of Art teacher at the Venice University, and many others who passionately study and teach about tea culture. I collect tea accessories from all over the world, and with my husband Carlo make a point of tasting something new every single day, or something we especially love and buy every year from our trusted suppliers.



Unfortunately, one lifetime is not enough to learn about everything the world of tea has to offer, but I consider myself lucky to have had the opportunity to enter this world and to get to know it a little bit better every day.



I hope the many limitations imposed by the problems of recent years can soon lift, so that international travel can fully resume without worry and with costs that are accessible to all. In 2018 the famous *Tamaryokucha* tea producers from Higashi Sonogi in Nagasaki came to Venice and, during a workshop I organized, Yoshitaka Oyama-san presented the Japanese teas and in particular those produced in his area. Many tea enthusiasts and professionals arrived from all over Italy for the occasion. The pandemic brought this project to a halt, but I hope to be able to resume it as soon as possible, so I invite all tea producers wishing to visit one of the most beautiful cities in the world to come to Venice and present their work to us Italians.

One thing is certain: for a Tea Sommelier in Italy there is still a lot of work to do!