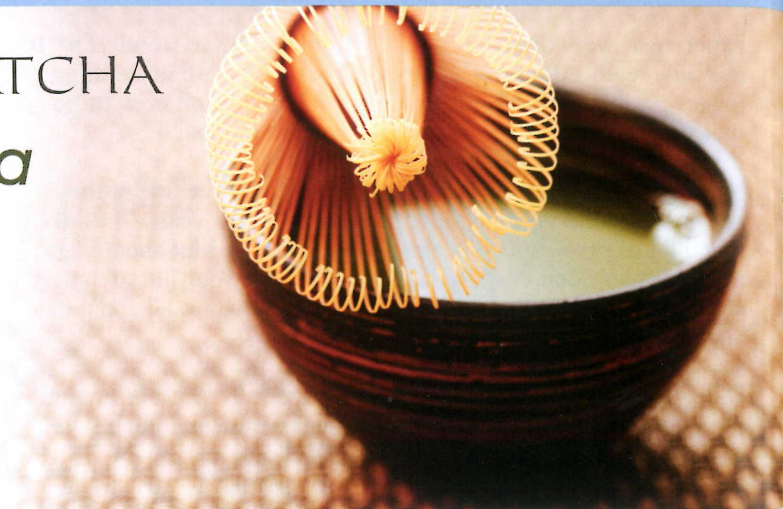


# THE WAY OF THE MATCHA

## *The Super Green Tea*



Three months ago, I began wondering if I should--or could--quit coffee. While I loved the roasted aroma and deep flavor, it was giving me a number of unwanted side effects. First and foremost, I was addicted. Without coffee I suffered persistent headaches and a foggy mind. Yet with it, I was on a jittery roller coaster. Shaky hands would accompany that surge of energy, and inexplicably, I felt more tired after the rush than I had before drinking it! The list goes on: sleeplessness, hunger cravings and, I might as well face it, bad breath.

The first few weeks of weaning myself from coffee took a heroic amount of restraint. I craved, I pined, I longed for just a sip of that rich draught. I comforted myself with weak cups of decaf and wrinkled my nose at every swallow. Ladies and gentlemen, I was in a bad place.

Fortunately, I discovered something that is gaining popularity here in North America and has been used for centuries in Japan: matcha green tea. As it turns out, one little cup of this green stuff packs a powerful punch of nutritional value as well as sustained energy that makes it a viable option for coffee and black tea drinkers. To find out why, I spoke with Calli O'Brien from DoMatcha, a Vancouver-based tea company that has imported matcha from Japanese manufacturers dating back to the 1600's. I also talked with Dr. Michael Einsohn, a natural medicine practitioner whose philosophy that "food is medicine" leads him to prefer matcha to coffee, and he prescribes the same to others.

### ***Where does matcha come from?***

Matcha has been used in Japan for ages. However, it was historically reserved for royalty, samurai, dignitaries and the upper class. Zen monks also drank it before long hours of meditation to help foster a calm and focused state of mind.

"Matcha is grown in the sunlight, but is kept shade-covered

during the last few weeks of its growing season, which forces chlorophyll to the surface," Calli explains. "Then the top outermost leaves are hand-picked, lightly steamed, de-veined and de-stemmed." After that, the matcha is slowly stone ground into a fine vibrant green powder. This gentle processing is done to preserve the bright color and the taste profile, but as a result, it keeps the tea's nutrients intact.

This fine green powder goes straight into your cup--no tea bags, no strainers. "Ingesting the entire tea leaf instead of just drinking the infusion and throwing the leaves away," Calli points out, "means you get the complete benefits of the tea leaf instead of a watered down version of it." The difference can be similar to, say, eating an orange versus drinking watery orange juice. If you eat the whole food, you're going to get the whole nutritional value that comes from it.

### ***And what might the nutritional value be?***

You may have heard that green tea is absorbed more slowly into the body, creating long-lasting energy...minus that annoying spike and crash that some (myself included) experience with coffee and even black teas. "You're taking something in that has full spectrum nutrients to it," Dr. Einsohn tells me, "And when that caffeine comes in to the body, it's being processed along with a whole food." The result is that the caffeine is released more slowly into the bloodstream.

Because there is caffeine in matcha, if you're trying to give up coffee, you can switch to matcha without the aforementioned withdrawal. No nausea, no headache for many. Dr. Einsohn found this out himself when his wife brought home the tea from a health food store in Dallas. "I drank organic coffee at the time," he says. "I wasn't trying to get off coffee, but the day after I had matcha, my body was craving green tea. So I listened to my body." He switched immediately, and from that day on had no issues of withdrawal.

As I'm sure you've also heard, green tea is chock full of antioxidants. Catechins, a type of antioxidant, come from the tea plant. "And when we drink green tea infusions," Calli explains, "we only get the infusions of antioxidants. When we drink a gently-processed matcha, we get them in an almost raw, live form." A study published in the Journal of Chromatography (Sept 2003) conducted at the University of Colorado determined that matcha green tea contains 137 times more of the powerful anti-cancer epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) than regular "brewed" green tea. As far as antioxidants go, this means that drinking one cup of matcha is like drinking ten cups of green tea.

So, if we're drinking the equivalent of ten cups of green tea, why aren't matcha drinkers bouncing off the walls? As mentioned before, the matcha is releasing caffeine slowly into the body, but it also contains L-Theanine, a natural de-stressor that can counteract the stimulant affects. "The result is that matcha can help us feel calm, focused, creative, mentally alert," Calli says. No wonder monks used it before meditation.

As a hypoglycemic, I was pleased to learn that the high amount of antioxidants and polysaccharides in matcha can also help to regulate blood sugar. "When blood sugar stays high due to cellular toxicity, glucose is not able to cross membrane and enter into cell to be used by body," Dr. Eihnson affirms. "Antioxidants and the high concentrations of chlorophyll clear out cellular toxicity." This, in turn, leads some to think that matcha may help detoxify the blood.

And, by the way, it can also help boost metabolism, "Sustained energy brings change in metabolism," Dr. Eihnson says, "When you have sustained energy coming from that slowly-released caffeine, you're going to help foster sustained metabolism." Bonus!

### What kind should I get?

"Matcha has different grades," Calli tells me. "Much like wine can cost \$7 per bottle... or a hundred. It depends on the year, when the leaves were picked, where they were grown."

Are you looking for a smooth taste? So is the rest of Asia. Try tea from the first harvest. "For the Japanese, taste, color and scent are favored. Smoother tasting, first-harvest leaves (the earliest leaves picked) are generally sold to them and are more expensive," Calli says. Rather have an extra boost of antioxidants? Go for the second harvest. "In North America, we like the health benefits over taste, and the second harvest is more antioxidant-rich, with a slightly bitter flavor," she explains. "Both are good for you; it just depends on what kind of experience you'd like."

### How do I make it?

I began making matcha using a normal kitchen whisk and a bowl. I used 1/2 teaspoon of matcha for 1- 1/2 half cups of 100 degree water (or milk, if making a latte) and used quick, zig-zagging strokes until the surface is covered in bubbles. This works pretty well, but if you're looking for a more frothy, foamy drink, you're better off using a ceremonial bamboo whisk, easily purchased online. A cappuccino frother can also be used, but as Calli laughs, "It's not very zenlike."

### Building Health

I asked Dr. Eihnson for some last thoughts on matcha. "Food is medicine, and I love to take in as many medicinal things as possible for me," He told me. "My wife and I love to surround ourselves with foods that give nutrients to our bodies. When you start surrounding yourself with those things, you build health in a whole new way." This idea is the foundation of his medical practice; building health from the ground up is perhaps as ancient as the tea itself, and just as wise.



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