



Japanese Tea in Switzerland: Between Emergence and Challenges to Overcome

By Niels Renard

Tea in Switzerland: A Surprising Landscape

In Switzerland, despite often being overshadowed by the popularity of coffee, tea is gaining ground with a growing passion. From active tea clubs to elegant boutiques dotting major cities, the tea scene surprises and intrigues. But even more surprising is the presence of tea plantations nestled in the southern Alps of the country. Despite this wealth of tea-related experiences, few enthusiasts expect to find these gems in Switzerland. Specialized shops and tea rooms dot major cities such as Basel, Bern, Geneva, Lucerne, Lausanne, and Zurich, offering unexpected tea delights.

Simultaneously, Japanese tea, a true secular cultural treasure, is finding its place in Swiss consumption habits. This elixir, a millennia-old heritage known for its flavors and medicinal virtues, is gradually making its mark on the Swiss tea market. This narrative explores the historical evolution of Japanese tea in Switzerland, delving into consumer preferences and highlighting Lemoncha, a pioneering company in promoting this exquisite beverage. Beyond being just a trend, the consumption of Japanese tea in Switzerland weaves a cultural link between these two nations, merging Japanese refinement with Swiss appreciation for authenticity and tradition.

Demystifying Green Tea and Valuing Quality

Switzerland, a confirmed lover of coffee, maintains a unique relationship with tea. On average, each resident consumes one cup of tea per day. But the real surprise lies in the enthusiasm for iced tea, where Switzerland ranks as the champion of Europe. Its consumption surpasses that of all other European countries, ranking just behind Taiwan and Japan on a global scale.

In 2021, the average consumption of drinking water in Switzerland reached 600 ml per day per person, with an additional 35 ml of tea and 115 ml of coffee. Thus, tea represents a substantial part of the beverages consumed daily.

In the past, Nestea, owned for 25 years by Nestlé and Coca-Cola, and Migros' Ice Tea, reigned supreme in the Swiss iced tea market. However, the arrival of nearly 600 new tea recipes in Europe in 2017 initiated fierce competition, marking a turning point. Since the 1980s, an innovative iced tea created by Ruedi Bärlocher and Martin Sprenger from Bischofszell, once mocked, became the unofficial symbol of Switzerland, propelling the country among the world leaders in iced tea consumption, with about 30 liters per person each year.



Migros Ice Tea, © Migros Group

Despite this enthusiasm for iced tea, Swiss consumers' knowledge of Japanese tea remains limited. Buyers often find themselves acquiring poor-quality tea at high prices, deceived by "Japan" labels on packaging. Tea stores, perceived as elitist, intimidate the youth with their traditional aspect. The perceived complexity of tea preparation acts as a barrier for novices, reflecting a similar trend observed in Japan, where bottled tea sales surpass loose tea due to the fast-paced lifestyle.

Although Switzerland is familiar with black tea, a direct influence of neighboring Britain, green tea has long been relegated to the background. This preference for black tea is partly explained by a lack of knowledge about the specific infusion parameters for green tea. Unlike coffee, where infusion rules are well established, the green tea infusion process requires particular attention and often unknown specific conditions. The complexity of this subtle art, where water temperature and infusion time must be meticulously respected, remains an enigma for many Swiss tea enthusiasts. This lack of knowledge contributes to perpetuating a negative perception of green tea, reducing its appeal among Swiss consumers.

Black tea, despite its popularity in Switzerland, is often consumed with milk and sugar, practices that often mask its intrinsic quality. This habit of mixing black tea with sweet and milky elements is deeply rooted in Swiss culture, often making the flavor nuances of black tea less noticeable. While this practice may offer a comforting drink, it also reduces sensitivity to the subtleties of this type of tea, creating a less pronounced interest in purer varieties and their distinct characteristics.

Currently in Switzerland, Japanese tea is mainly adopted by Asia or Japan connoisseurs, with a notable exception for matcha, widely prized, especially in its sweet Matcha Latte form. However, the availability of Japanese teas outside the home remains rather limited. The tea options available mainly include bottled iced tea, often sweetened and flavored for convenience, teas in easily portable sachets, or Bubble Tea, which has become popular among the youth. Unfortunately, the quest for quality tea outside the home remains a relatively

challenging endeavor. This limited situation can restrict access to authentic and quality teas for consumers seeking more authentic and delicate experiences in their exploration of the world of Japanese tea.

In a country where operating costs, especially city-center rents, are high, the survival of small tea businesses, especially in major Swiss cities, is a delicate undertaking. Faced with these economic challenges, these independent businesses must reinvent themselves to adapt to a demanding environment. To thrive, they must expand their clientele by targeting a younger and more diverse audience.

This transformation requires an innovative approach that combines marketing strategies, the selection of innovative products, and sometimes even an increased digital presence. To remain relevant, these businesses must rethink their traditional practices and adopt creative initiatives. The integration of digital, for example, would allow them to reach a clientele beyond the restricted geographical boundaries of the city center.

Navigating through these financial challenges, these tea boutiques seek to renew themselves to meet the changing expectations of consumers, thereby preserving not only their existence but also the rich and stimulating experience they offer to their caffeine-loving clientele.



Hōjicha tea with yuzu marmelade and cannelé

Lemoncha: From Bubble Tea Craze to the Richness of Japanese Tea

A few years ago, a trend emerged in the Swiss tea market with the arrival of bubble teas. While the first establishment opened its doors in 2011, only a few insiders dared to venture out to discover this Taiwanese beverage.

Starting from 2017, a movement marked by the opening of new bubble tea businesses on a national scale emerged, mainly concentrated in the French-speaking region of the country. However, most of these establishments offer fairly mediocre quality tea, attracting mainly a young audience eager for exotic flavors and vibrant colors. Often, bubble tea, derived from a concentrated tea infused in the morning for the entire day, reveals strength and bitterness. These characteristics are often masked by the addition of massive amounts of fruit syrups and sugar.

Yet, one company stood out from 2017 by adopting an innovative approach: *Lemoncha*. Targeting a young clientele unfamiliar with tea, founders Boris Balladone and Niels Renard reinvented the bubble tea concept with the Tea Bar.

At *Lemoncha*, bubble tea serves as a gateway to explore countless tea varieties. *Lemoncha* offers its customers no less than 14 different types of teas, including 4 Japanese teas: genmaicha, gyokuro, hojicha, and kukicha.

At *Lemoncha*, quality takes precedence above all else. Each tea undergoes on-the-spot infusion, meticulously following precise brewing rules and temperatures to extract the full array of flavors inherent in each variety. From its creation, the company directed its efforts toward premium tea. Through its Bubble Tea offerings, *Lemoncha* appeals to a younger clientele less familiar in the world of tea, thereby introducing them to a largely unexplored universe. Emphasizing the quality of its beverages, *Lemoncha* consistently champions both the qualitative and ecological aspects of its products.

Today, *Lemoncha* has over 70% of customers over 20 years old, with a significant portion (1 out of 2 customers) falling between 21 and 35 years old, unlike most other establishments that attract a younger audience. The major difference lies in *Lemoncha's* strategic choice to offer a trendy drink while using high-quality products and reducing sugar content. *Lemoncha's* pride lies in its collaboration with a tea cooperative based in the Shizuoka prefecture, Japan, for the import of its Japanese green teas.

Initially, the majority of *Lemoncha's* customers opted for drinks garnished with toppings like tapioca or fruits. However, a noticeable shift has occurred: more and more customers now prefer drinks without toppings or natural, unflavored teas. This transition represents a significant success for *Lemoncha*!



All teas at Lemoncha are freshly brewed



Lemoncha Hanami Fruit Tea (Gyokuro Green Tea, rose & litchee with Sakura flowers) & Sakura Latte

Guided by their passion for Japan, *Lemoncha's* founders also offer limited seasonal drinks every year themed around Hanami. These special creations can be enjoyed at *Lemoncha's* Tea Bars, redecorated with Sakura flower colors for the occasion. Perhaps due to this, nearly one in every two green teas sold at *Lemoncha* now comes from Japan. The curiosity of Swiss consumers for Japanese tea is undeniable, but accessible resources to deepen this knowledge remain limited. Initiatives such as *Lemoncha's* participation in a Japanese tea seminar in Shizuoka thanks

to the World Green Tea Association sparked great interest. *Lemoncha* actively shared its Japanese tea experience on social media, revealing fascinating aspects of tea culture. This approach received enthusiastic feedback from customers, showing a genuine curiosity and desire to learn more.

However, the observation remains: the majority of Swiss consumers have only basic knowledge about tea as a whole. Subtleties such as the common origin from the same plant of different teas or the nuances of temperature and infusion time depending on the varieties remain largely unknown. To address this lack of information and offer quality service, *Lemoncha* implemented an internal Tea Specialist certification for its staff.

This exhaustive training spans three months, combining in-person sessions and specially designed digital or printed materials by the company.

Thanks to this certification, *Lemoncha's* staff becomes a source of reliable and detailed knowledge for customers. These tea experts can accurately respond to customer inquiries, share information about the origin of the teas offered, and provide informed advice on tea selection and preparation. This proactive approach meets the growing demand for in-depth knowledge about Japanese tea, strengthening customer engagement while broadening their gustatory and cultural horizons.

Effects of the Pandemic on Japanese Tea Consumption in Switzerland

The pandemic profoundly influenced tea consumption habits in Switzerland, particularly for Japanese tea. Periods of confinement and social distancing restrictions radically changed consumer behaviors. Many, confined to their homes, prioritized enriching sensory and taste experiences, especially through the appreciation of comforting beverages such as tea.

This situation impacted tea-related businesses, including *Lemoncha*. To adapt, these companies had to meet the changing expectations of their clientele. *Lemoncha* strengthened its online presence, offering customers the ability to order their products from home. Delivery services were optimized to ensure rapid and secure distribution of quality Japanese teas.

These changes highlighted the importance of agility and adaptability for businesses, especially in the food and beverage sector. Innovation while preserving product quality became crucial to remain competitive, especially in the face of circumstances as unpredictable as those induced by the pandemic.

Faced with the rise of environmental awareness among customers, tea industry companies face new challenges in adapting their products. *Lemoncha*, for example, recently introduced an initiative to offer all its drinks in reusable cups, without additional cost to customers. *Lemoncha's* covering of the financial surplus for these reusable cups was well received. This evolution reflects a growing change among consumers looking to avoid plastic, posing a challenge for companies producing bottled plastic iced tea. Although Switzerland leads Europe in PET recycling, customers express a growing desire to turn to more ecological alternatives, placing additional pressure on tea industry companies to rethink their packaging and practices in favor of the environment.



Christila and her Tea Specialist Certification

Regarding future prospects for Japanese tea consumption in Switzerland, the pandemic sparked a growing interest in authentic and quality products. This underscores a possible shift toward increased demand for high-quality teas. *Lemoncha* and other quality-focused companies could thus benefit from a demanding clientele seeking unique sensory experiences and authentic products.

Japanese tea, often associated with a traditional and Zen image rooted in the millennia-old rituals of the tea ceremony, can also reinvent itself by breaking established norms. By adopting modern methods such as *Kōridashi*, which involves tea infusion with ice cubes for a refreshing and innovative experience, this drink can break conventions and attract a younger and more contemporary clientele. Moreover, to reach a clientele fond of bolder and more varied flavors, Japanese tea can also offer modern aromas like herbs, spices, or fruits. This alternative approach broadens the horizons of Japanese tea by offering options suited to modern tastes while preserving the quality and tradition of this ancestral drink.

In summary, the pandemic acted as an accelerator, amplifying existing consumption trends, and highlighting the importance of rapid adaptation for companies in the Japanese tea industry in Switzerland. These challenges also opened the way to new opportunities and promising perspectives for a market more focused on quality and customer experience.



Iced tea brewing or Kōridashi

The Future of Japanese Tea in Switzerland through Collaboration



Niels Renard (left) and Boris Balladone (right) at a tea factory in Shizuoka

Exporting Japanese tea to Switzerland presents various challenges for suppliers, especially in the face of new consumer expectations. One of the notable evolutions concerns the increasing demand for organic products. Swiss consumers are increasingly conscious of the origin and quality of the products they consume. Their interest in organic foods and beverages, free from pesticides and chemicals, translates into a search for organic certifications. Japanese tea suppliers must therefore adapt by offering teas grown in accordance with organic standards, meeting this growing demand for more natural and environmentally friendly products.

Another major challenge for Japanese tea suppliers is customs regulations and import processes. Exporting to Switzerland involves compliance with Swiss standards and regulations for the importation of foodstuffs. This includes not only compliance with Swiss food safety and

sanitary standards but also the management of customs formalities and import taxes. The complexity of these procedures can sometimes pose an obstacle for suppliers, requiring a deep understanding of regulations and partnerships with local distributors or importers to facilitate the import process.

Furthermore, the diversity of tastes and preferences among Swiss consumers represents another challenge for Japanese tea suppliers. The Swiss are accustomed to a wide variety of teas, and the offer must adapt to this diversity, proposing both traditional Japanese teas and more innovative or locally adapted varieties. This requires a thorough study of the Swiss market, its trends, and consumer preferences in order to adjust the offer accordingly and find a balance between tradition and innovation to appeal to Swiss consumers.

The world of tea, especially Japanese tea, faces significant challenges, and this dynamic does not seem likely to diminish soon. Yet, amidst these obstacles, a glimmer of optimism persists. A promising strategy to address these challenges lies in strengthening partnerships and collaborations within this small community of enthusiasts. Japanese tea constitutes a separate universe, where solidarity and unity can play a crucial role in overcoming obstacles.

The challenges faced by Japanese tea, from diversification of consumer tastes to adaptation to changing environmental standards, require a joint approach. Partnerships among stakeholders in the tea world can offer mutual support, stimulating innovation and creativity to meet the new demands of the market.

Thus, despite persistent challenges, the future of Japanese tea remains promising through the strength of partnerships and unity within this community. These collaborations can not only help overcome current challenges but also pave the way for a more sustainable, innovative, and prosperous Japanese tea industry.

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