

Matcha has taken over pop culture. The drink has become a new social media craze as influencers have shared reviews, the matcha tok hashtag has gotten tens of millions of views, and popular brands have added matcha to their menus. The drink's popularity can be largely attributed to Japan's tourist boom following the coronavirus pandemic. Since the country's currency is weak it has become a more desired location and the demand for Japanese goods has only increased. Nonetheless, in order to understand the rise of matcha and its effects, we first have to look at its origins.

Traditionally, matcha is made through an extremely specialized process and is often wanted for its health benefits. It is made from tencha, green tea leaves, that are kept in the shade for weeks as they are growing. These leaves are then harvested, dried, and ground into a powder. This grinding is done using stone mills which produce about 1.4 ounces of matcha an hour. The most desired matcha is often milled when the leaves are the sweetest during the first harvest of the spring. However, recently, record breaking heatwaves have hit crops leaving many growers struggling. Japan has also been facing a shortage of farmers in its population, as many younger individuals do not wish to go into the field.

Despite this, the drink remains more popular than ever. Matcha production in Japan has nearly tripled between 2010 and 2023, according to Japan's agriculture ministry. Retailers are selling out of shipments of the product within minutes, and limited supply may be a cause for concern. Furthermore, there is a supply shortage of first flush, which is matcha grown by an individual farmer, and is the base of many popular matcha drinks. Matcha has become extremely desired within countries like the United States, with sales growing by 86 percent over the past three years, and is being bought from places besides Japan. Popular companies like Starbucks buy their matcha from China and South Korea in addition to Japan.

However, the worldwide matcha obsession has caused issues for some companies within the industry. Many highly respected Japanese firms are having difficulties with vendors who are reselling their matcha significantly above the normal retail price on sites like Facebook Marketplace and Amazon. In addition, tea firms who have built their companies' reputations up over centuries are now having difficulties with counterfeiters who are selling fake products containing lower quality green tea.

Unfortunately, being such a new market, matcha labeling is entirely unregulated. This makes it much easier for cheap alternatives to pass off as premium products. While many brands label their goods as imperial grade or ceremonial grade, these classifications remain undefined, and are mainly used outside of Japan. Even matcha itself seems to be up to interpretation. Because there are no regulatory guidelines all new drinks are popping up throughout the world under the matcha label. One of the biggest examples of this is the way that popular companies are branding their matcha drinks, with Starbucks developing a new line of protein drinks with three flavors of matcha and Sorate selling iced coconut water matcha.

Despite there being a worldwide matcha shortage, you would never know walking around the streets of popular cities like London and Los Angeles. Companies have taken full advantage of the new trend and are catering to it. Some businesses such as Blank Street Coffee have even done complete rebrands. The company originally went viral for their popular matcha drinks, which now make up about half of their entire profit. They began to play into the product more and more, even changing their name to Blank Street and adding more matcha drinks than coffee onto their menu.

However, while the popularity of matcha continues to rise, it is important to consider the culture that it comes from. Over the course of four hundred years, Japan has built a tradition of

drinking matcha based on the principles of wa, kei, sei, and jaku. This means harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. The product is also used within tea ceremonies in Japanese culture. It is crucial that as we share in this cultural drink we understand what it stands for and recognize its significance. While social media has sparked the drink's popularity it has also begun a movement focused on mindful consumption. This allows people to consume the drink in modern ways while still appreciating the culture that it stems from. Have you ever tried matcha?