

Obukucha: A Tea for The New Year Matcha's Magic



Soyu Makai's assistant serves the first bowl of tea to a guest. First we were encouraged to eat our little sweet to prepare the mouth and then the bliss of a cup of tea.

A small door swishes aside pulled open by a lithe arm draped in silk. And there stands Soyu Makai, in all of her precise and minute glory. Light boned, and layered in dark silks 'Soyu' (a title name given to the tea master) is known beyond her tea circles as Yumi Makai. A high priestess in my mind, she is in reality, a respected 25-year veteran and teacher in the Urasenke school of Chado, the Japanese 'art' of tea. Eight other guests await as I do for a ceremony of powdered matcha and there is the immediate sensation, seeing this immaculate teacher that another world exists on the other side of the door. I feel sloppy somehow from my rough Yunnan tea traditions, and have very consciously made sure that I'm as 'neat' as can be expected for this event.

Far from my 'roots' in Yunnan, where the simpler ways of tea focus on the tea itself, the ceremonial tea ritual I am here to attend adds meaning to every single aspect of serving, sipping, and preparing of tea. The entire world I am about to enter seems dedicated to removing everything non-related to this tea moment out of the psyche.

There is a deliberate and imprecise geometry everywhere around me as my newly slippered feet take me into a small sanctum of squares that is not quite square. The 'flooring' is a series of interlaying mats that way more than 30 kg's each. The center-point of the room is a thick black kettle, which is fired from below by smokeless bamboo charcoal. Briefly a small gold leaf of flame is visible, but here in this silent room even fire is carefully controlled. Not one wisp of smoke slips into the air, but I've already felt the control and absolute adherence to seamless traditions here and I expect nothing but precision.

This little gathering which I'm grateful to attend, is to bring in the New Year. In a ceremony known as Obukucha, the nine of us will adhere to a posture of sitting, observe the rules of the ceremony, and finally sipping of the divine green leaf.

We are carefully 'placed' into our respective kneeling spots in two small lines boxing in our master and the black kettle. Behind 'Soyu' another sliding door leads somewhere and at her side the sculpted and sublime tools of the upcoming ceremony.

Powdered tea, introduced by Eisai (1141-1215) to Japan after he returned from study in China, was once the tea of ritual and tribute. Eisai also introduced the refined traditions of Renzai Zen, but the tea seeds he returned with and subsequently gave to monk Myoe to be planted, were the beginnings of the powdered tea tradition. The traditions of both Zen and tea complemented each other and it was together that they evolved in both esthetic and intent. Quiet surroundings, quiet posture, but vigorous focus, were keys to both ceremonies. Tea gatherings in Japan are all (as they have always been) about 'one time, one meeting, one tea', so the event is something slightly different and special each time, with the intention of taking one 'away'. Though many formal schools differ in details, the intention is largely similar: to be able to focus the mind and heart upon an original and unique experience.

Within our group there is the slightly nervous apprehension of those who are about to embark on something fascinating and utterly ordered all at once. I am all too aware that my tea habits are about to be disciplined and part of me worries that I will somehow slip up.

My very mortal knees are in for a particular treat of pain and I am already fully aware of it. While movement is permitted during the ceremony, guests are 'encouraged' to remain in a kneeling position and remain still. My grandmother always used to say that discomfiture focused the mind, but I've never completely subscribed to that particular philosophy, so it will be an invigorating experience in many ways. Soyu's soft voice introduces the wish for a harmonious New Year with the Obukucha ceremony. It is a ceremony that is specific in our case to bringing in the New Year. 'O-buku-cha' itself hints at its ceremonial use, meaning "tea of great fortune". Soyu Makai introduces the tea that we will take. An Obukucha itself may differ depending the seller, the producer or the tea master. Our own ceremony will be a high-grade powdered tea from the fabled and famed Uji region near Kyoto. In the Obukucha ceremony there is no rule or law as to which tea can be served, but it is inevitably a classic tea that isn't normally had. In this case our tea will be served 'thick'. Only the highest levels of matcha are considered for use in thick tea, as their astringency levels are far less. The temperature – one of the tea world's great almost neurotic details – should be no more than 60 degrees and only 30 cc's of water will be used. As a point of interest, a 'thin' tea will be used twice as much water, with temperatures twenty degrees higher.

As Soyu Makai introduces the minimalist tea utensils, the 'kama' (kettle), 'jawan' (hand made tea bowl), Chatsubo (tea jar), an assistant in a fuchsia colored kimono drifts through that hidden door I had noticed upon entering, to add water to a hand-crafted water container. Her entry is formal and invisible, though it is hard not to be drawn to the small precise steps and impeccable coordination that she displays. One could not fail to see the ritualistic and practiced movement to every single aspect of this 'time and place'.

Somehow, the assistant who is never introduced, disappears noiselessly back through the same door carefully closing it behind her. A moment later, she appears again, this time with a sweet for the first guest. Moving in a clockwise order this hard candy is offered before each kneeling – and in my case almost excruciatingly painful – guest a folded white napkin. As it is placed before us, the fuchsia assistant bows to the receiving guest, placing her two palms face down just behind the offering. This little 'aperitif' of sorts will set up the mouth for the tea which will follow, but we cannot touch it quite yet.

The kettle meanwhile has not even purred, somehow being maintained at a constant temperature. Soyu then becomes silent and busy, and I am pulled into her world of tea preparation. A long bamboo curved spoon (natsumè) is used to collect brilliant green tea powder out of the black tea container. Soyu somehow manages to maintain a perfect little mountain of tea upon the bamboo tool, then twists her wrist dumping the little lump of green goodness into the ornate tea bowl and then in the silence of the room she does something that is both sudden and almost spiritual in its immediacy. She ever so slightly hits the bamboo spoon once against the cup to ensure every last bit of match powder has found its temporary home in the ornately tea bowl. Soyu then uses a folded serviette in a smooth movement to clean the bamboo. Every movement stands apart from one another, while seamlessly blending into one another. The serviette is then tucked into her silk sash that ties the kimono to her waist.

The silence, and formal precision of every single breath of this ceremony demands total attention and in that total attention the mind and body leave the outside world, precisely where it should be left, outside. It is explained later that this is one of the intentions of the chado. There is a much told story in Japan, of tea houses being one of the select few places that the famed Samurai didn't bring their swords. The tea ceremony was not part of the everyday; it was rather an escape of the everyday.

Soyu Makai rushes nothing, and in every moment of her thorough ritual she carves out more of my respect. Adherence to a tradition in a world, where laziness is often camouflaged as 'spontaneous' and creative, this ritual seems somehow to hold onto something of itself.

Soyu has moved on in her own choreographed series of preparatory stages. She delicately picks up that marvel (in my own eyes at least) of the Japanese matcha ceremony, the bamboo tea whisk (*chasen*) is put into use. Hot water from the kettle

is then spooned carefully into the tea bowl, at which point the spoon is carefully put to rest. Soyu Makai picks up the bamboo whisk and stirs the water and powdered tea. There is the faintest touch of sound but I suspect that our master has even the exact number of stirs worked out. A serving of tea is almost complete.

In succession, each guest is served by the fuchsia colored assistant (who reappears), who nods to each individual in succession that it is time to eat the sweet which has remained untouched in front of each of us. When this sweet has 'prepared' my mouth, a fresh bowl of thick matcha – only 30 cc's worth – is placed in front of me. All of this waiting has strangely enough made me appreciate the paltry amount even more. After bowing my thanks I take the bowl and rotate it three times clock wise and sip the semi-bitter froth back where it ever-so-briefly suggests a creamy spinach broth (that is, what I imagine a creamy spinach broth would taste like). I have been told that the liquid should be taken in as few sips as possible, so my little slurp session incorporates only two inhalations.

My pulverized knees – temporarily - forget the pain and there is only the faint feeling that I could do with a few more bowls of the goodness.

The next guest is waiting though and they (and no doubt their punished knees) deserve the little frothy treat as much as I.

As we exit twenty minutes later, somehow and unbelievably walking back into the outside world, a question is put to Soyu Makai by one of my fellow drinkers, which slightly startles as it is the first 'outside' sound I've heard beyond our tea master and her utensils in nearly two hours. "When did you finish your tea studies"?

The answer seems so wonderfully consistent with what we've just been witness to when Soyu answers "One never finishes learning the way of tea. I am not close to being finished".



Our spartan and immaculate tea room moments before we are admitted as a group.

Soyu Makai enters with her immaculate set of tools.



Our tea master whisks the powdered tea using a bamboo hand-carved whisk. The bowl, as all tea bowls are in the Chado, is significant for both the design aspect and the creator themselves.

Our revered Soyu Makai in action. Every utensil has a place and time aspect attached to it.





What remains after a sip: a bright green froth.