

# Tea & I

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I was born the daughter of a tea cultivator in a small village next to a river. The village, planted mainly with cider trees, was nestled in the mountains, facing south. Mornings were sunny, and the air was full of mist floating up from the Tenryu River, which carries water from the Japanese Alps to the Pacific Ocean. This river is known both as "rioting Tenryu" and "restive Tenryu,"; it runs very quickly and powerfully when it rains heavily, but otherwise is pure and calm, like a lady.

The sound of the river was my lullaby every evening; I felt as though it was watching over me and protecting me while I slept.

In Shizuoka Prefecture, tea season begins at the end of April (unlike in southern Japan, when it begins in March).

When I was a child, the plucking of the tea flushes (freshly-picked tea leaves) was done by hand, so my mother had the important task of rounding up ten to fifteen female workers from the neighbouring villages. They had to pluck the flushes as quickly as possible, as the price of tea falls with each passing day during tea season.

Each worker was provided with a bamboo basket tied to her waist; when the basket was full, it would be emptied into a large central basket placed in a footpath. My mother's job was to bring this basket to the factory where my father waited.

In the factory, the tea leaves were spread onto the floor for drying, then placed into the steamer. Several processes followed. In those days, there were no computers or firing systems to operate the machines; my father had to keep them operating manually, through wood-burning; he had to carefully calculate times and temperatures (an extra ten seconds could destroy or damage an entire season's crop). This is where a tea cultivator's experience and skill are of the utmost importance.

During tea season my father slept very little; his work day began at five, and ended at midnight or later. His perspiration acting as glue, he was always covered in tea leaves; Japan in May is extremely warm, and my father spent his days in the factory surrounded by wood-burning machines. He undoubtedly lost several pounds by the end of the season.

It was only during the lunch hour that I felt that I was really being of help to my parents. We had to prepare the workers' meals—they brought only cooked rice with them. We prepared miso soup, cooked vegetables, pickles, and a main dish—a typical lunch menu—with tea afterward. Each meal was placed in a separate plate, which was placed on a tray for each worker. The workers sat on the wood-covered balcony as well as on the steps to the large entrance to my parents' home. Following lunch, I would wash the dishes, and this would make me feel proud to be a part of the whole process.

My mother would give each child a small basket. We plucked the flushes along with the experienced workers; we were given 50 yen each for one full basket, a rather generous wage when one considers that our daily allowance was 10 yen. One time a nice woman gave me a handful of flushes from her basket. I will never forget her sweetness, her smile. When I think of green tea, my heart aches with this sweet memory. This type of woman no longer exists today.

During this time I could be with my father whenever I wanted to be. He could not leave the site unless it was to bring the refined tea to market. He would offer us a sweet potato, tossing sweet potatoes onto the fire. We all enjoyed waiting for them to be cooked. The smell of burning wood and sweet potatoes is a memory that is as sweet to me as that of the smell of bonfires on camping trips to a typical westerner.

In May the fresh smell of the tea fields filled our lives. May is the month that the world begins to be covered in colours: flowers, trees, vegetables, fruits—nature stretches out her arms to enjoy her rebirth.

My parents were young and strong; during this season, my father seemed the handsomest man and my mother the most powerful woman in the world.

Green tea reminds me of my childhood—the blue sky, green mountains, green fields, colourful flowers, fresh vegetables, birdsong, the smell of fresh leaves and flowers, the smell of baking potatoes...I was the happiest child in the world. And I feel so grateful to all those people who gave me the gift of such beautiful childhood memories.