

## Japanese Tea Ceremony

All over the world, people enjoy teatime. In Japan, however, taking tea with guests can mean considerably more than a relaxing break to the day. The traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony is a very grand and elaborate affair.

The Japanese tea ceremony is more like a sacred ritual than a friendly gathering. Each aspect of the ceremony is symbolic and adds great charm and meaning to this unique event.

The ceremony is conducted in a room called chashitsu, located in the teahouse. Fresh water symbolizing purity is held in a stone jar called the mizusashi, and may only be touched by the host. Matcha (tea) is kept in a small ceramic container covered in shifuku (fine silk pouch) and set in front of the mizusashi. Special stands called tana are used to display the tea bowls, and differ depending on the occasion.

The host enters with the chawan (tea bowl) containing a chasen (tea whisk), a chakin (a bleached white linen tea cloth) and the chashaku (tea scoop). Next to these items is a water jar, symbolic of the sun (yang) and a bowl, symbolizing the moon (yin). The host brings the kensui (waste water bowl), the hishaku (bamboo water ladle) and futaoki (a green bamboo rest for the kettle lid), and purifies the tea container and scoop using a fukusa (fine silk cloth).

Hot water is ladled into the tea bowl. The whisk is rinsed and the tea bowl is emptied and wiped with the chakin. For each guest, three scoops of tea are placed into the tea bowl. The whisk is used to create a thin paste using a sufficient quantity of hot water. Additional water is then added, while the paste is whisked into a thick liquid.

The tea bowl is passed to the main guest. He or she drinks some of the tea, wipes the rim of the bowl, and passes the bowl to the next guest. Each guest follows this same procedure until all have tasted the tea. The bowl is then returned to the host, who rinses it and cleans the tea scoop and the container.

A fire is then built for usucha (thin tea), which rinses the palate, symbolizing the departure of the guests from the spiritual world of tea and back into the physical world. Smoking articles are offered as a gesture of relaxation, but smoking does not typically take place in a tearoom.

Finally, zabuton (cushions) and teaburi (hand warmers) are offered for the comfort of the guests, and higashi (dry sweets) are served. Before leaving the teahouse, guests will express their appreciation for the tea and their admiration for host's attention to the fine art of serving tea.

If you are ever given the chance to attend a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, be sure to attend. There is no other experience quite like it.