

Sayamaen's Newsletter "IPPUKU"

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Although we were not able to visit to Shizuoka before Shincha season because of the

Covid pandemic in this year, we decided to held a remote interview with Mr. Fumio Maeda well-known of our original tea selection's "Tea Master's Fumio Maeda Gogumi Sencha" and Mr. Akira Matsushita, as organic Japanese tea farmer from Matsushitaen in Kakegawa city Shizuoka.

All we working in different fields in the tea industry as tea farmer (Mr.Matsushita), tea refiner/blender(Mr.Maeda), and retailer (us). We could talk to each other from different standpoints.

Nowadays Japanese tea industry is a division of labor with tea farmers/refiner, tea wholesalers, and retailers having just few contact points. That is why we were very interested in each other's work and the changes in the circumstances for tea production in recent years.

Matsushita's main job is the cultivation of growing and harvesting tea. They have their own tea plantations in Kakegawa and they make semi-process the tea (Aracha). Mr.Maeda

purchases such semi-processed Aracha from all over the region in Japan and refines and blends them to finish up the tea for sale on market as finishing products.

He is looking forward to stocking up on tea before this year's new harvest Shincha season.

Maeda : In the past, the tea produced in Kochi Prefecture used to look very shiny, hard twisted leaves but now it's rare to see such tea. I feel that teas which have unique characteristics are becoming less produced. I always want to purchase the best quality tea, so I ask the farmers to pick the tea early as possible, but you have to pick them in a timely manner, right?

Matsushita : I try to pick them early but if the fertilizer doesn't reach the new shoots from the main leaves the shoots may smell good but they won't have enough flavor and color. In Kakegawa where our production base is, we start picking tea around 20 April but I feel that the tea tastes better and the color of leaves are much brighter in May.

Mr. Maeda is also concerned about the current state of the tea plantations in recent years at Shizuoka. Because tea growing areas on the slopes of mountains are not being cared for well.

Maeda : There is a place called "Tawaramine" where you can find tea trees taller than I but it's a shame that it is no longer taken care of, since the place where good quality tea is produced. I thought that like us, tea wholesalers should support the tea farmers.

Matsushita : As the land on the top of the mountain becomes wastes, the drainage and ground conditions in the middle of the mountain also become worse. For the sake of tea production efficiency I understand people switch to growing tea in large, flat areas rather than a harsh environment in fields on steep slopes or in mountainous areas.



We also asked them the following question.

“What is the most important of the five senses in making tea?”

Maeda : Definitely it's the sense of smell. I judge doneness by the aroma of finishing tea as the firing stage (Hiire) in the tea refining process. Also it is important to have an aroma that is immediately noticeable to my nose when I sip tea. However with this Coronavirus catastrophe I have no choice to switch to a non-contact way of tea evaluation so I have to rely on just my sense of sight. It is also difficult to judge the texture of tea leaves over putting on gloves. That being so, I can say that in visual it is also important now.



Matsushita : Also I think it is the aroma that counts according to making Aracha. During Shincha season when I go to a tea plantation to cut the leaves I feel a strong aroma of young leaves. And whole places of our factory are filled with the good fresh Shincha aroma when the leaves are steamed. So as it turns out really well you can even smell the Shincha aroma outside the factory! Then my father tells me I've done well.

But even for tea professionals, there are always some challenges.

Maeda : If you are trying to make a tea to ultimate level, you will inevitably not be able to make a lot of it. I am always conflicted about how much I can come around. I use eight to ten different kinds of green tea for blending (Gougumi) to make just a single brand of tea but it doesn't always turn out the way I intended. I also have to be very careful when heating the tea (Hiire) because the taste and aroma of the tea changes with each temperature.

Making tea is redone from scratch every single year when the Shincha season comes. So I have been doing this job for over 30 years though, there are still a lot of things that I don't understand and I don't have confidence in myself. No, maybe I'd rather not be confident. So I can keep ask myself if this is good enough ?

It challenges only tea experts like Maeda and Matsushita could have. There seems to be no end to the challenges they have to face even if the tasks are different.

Matsushita : There are always pests and tea plants diseases problems in the organic tea cultivation. We cannot deal with natural disasters but if there are ways to deal with it and you don't do it, it will be a man-made disaster despite the possibility that tea may grow well.

I see some of them in Shinchu season but more getting it out in the second tea season around. If we could reduce the pests and other problems, the quality of the tea will improve and the yield increase, so we are working on that.

After the tea leaves are plucked, then, steamed.

The steaming process is particularly important in the production of Aracha.

Matsushita : In Kakegawa, the steaming process is so important that it accounts for 80% of the entire tea process. So the person with the most experienced is in charge of the steaming machine and is responsible for this process. The color of the finished Aracha leaves are especially important.

Mr. Maeda is not involved in the Aracha production process. However he has an interesting experience.

Maeda : In the past one of my tea-seniors told me that “The appearance is the most important factor for tea leaves”. So I chose Aracha I thought looked good, bright and shiny, but actually it was not steamed well enough and no matter how much I heated it only an unpleasant wild greenish smell came out. That’s true that looks are important. but at same time I learned that to balance the taste also need to account for finishing tea.



Shizuoka finally topped Kagoshima in tea shipments in 2019. It is said that it will soon reverse the trend in terms of production volume as well.

We asked Mr. Maeda about where he sees himself in 10 years.

Maeda : Well, I'm 60 years old now, and I'm wondering how many years more I can work. The young companies who I work with are getting able to take over the work so I would like them to carry on the flavor of our MAEDA tea wholesaler but not by doing everything the same way though, adding their own unique touch and flavors for making tea would be nice.

However, Mr. Maeda is also concerned that as the amount of tea production decreases every year as a result, making unique tea options would become more limited.

We asked the same question to Mr. Matsushita.

Matsushita : My Father says that there are few things that will continue to sell for 10 years. He started making Matcha about 10 years ago. And he cultivated a new organic tea field in Mt.Ogasa 10 years before the Matcha production. We still keep doing work and selling for over 10 years. Well, It's been more than 10 years since I took over this work and We started taking on new challenges now! But we always focus on "Organic tea production". I think the value of organically grown crops is still low standing in Japan and I hope that go up in value of organically grown crops in the next 10 years or so.



Our impression throughout this interview is that they genuinely enjoy making tea, despite the many challenges they are facing. Their sincere attitude and passions toward producing tea you feel that they are more of a "Craftsman" than just a tea expert.

We are also very much looking forward to Shincha they will make at 2021!

Translation from original text • KAYOKO IKEYA of Sayamaen Japanese tea l.t.d.,