

Personality Type:

Matcha

It's hard for me to imagine another beverage that has such a rich cultural history while being surrounded by so much drama — but alas, here we are — and can I say, we weren't ready for any of it. The way that matcha has skyrocketed in popularity, seemingly overnight, was something that most people were not prepared for.

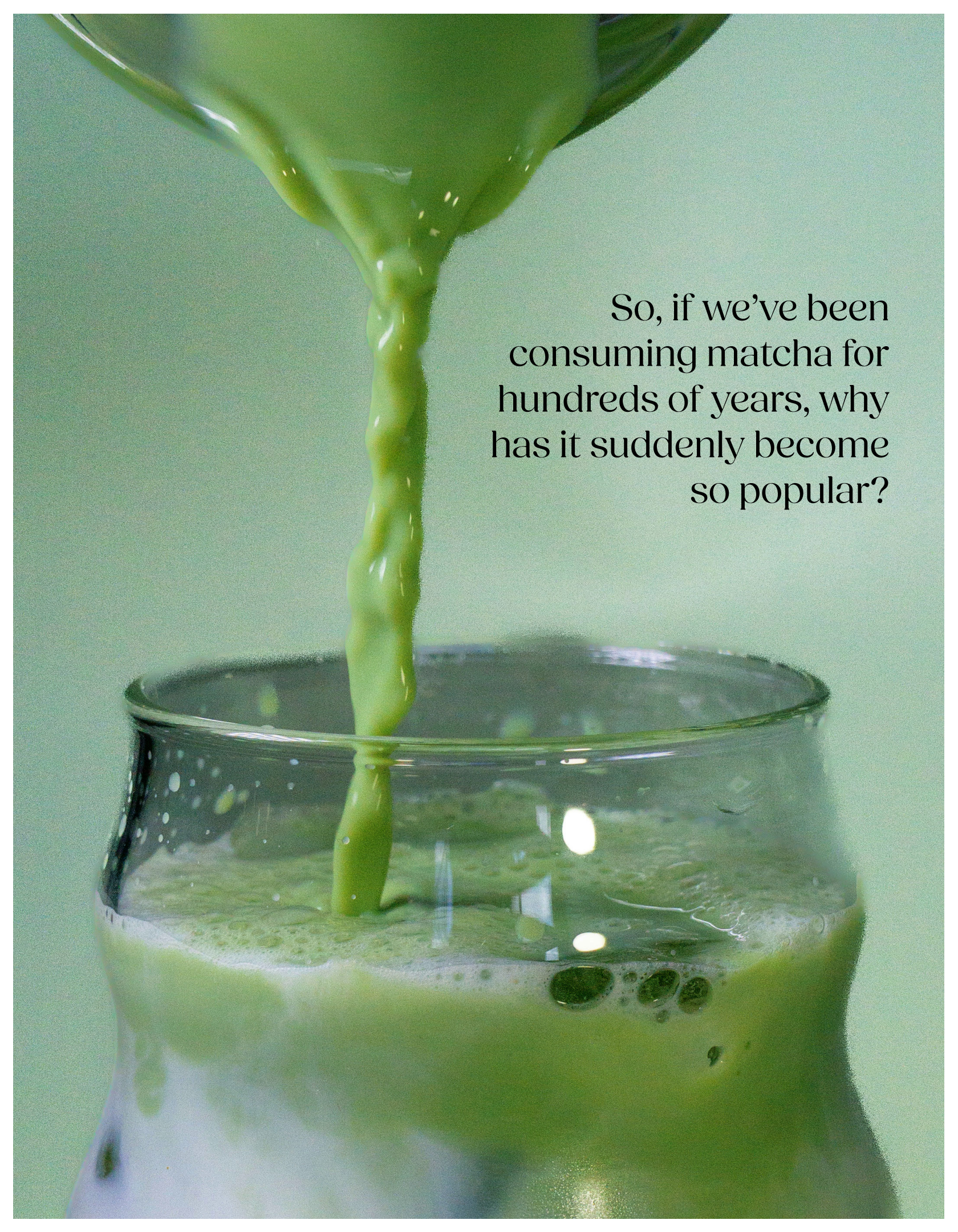
I'm predominantly a coffee drinker, and an avid one at that. After years of drinking drip and iced Americanos, I haven't found a good reason to add another source of caffeine in my life; however, I will admit, that seeing people wait over an hour to try this green grassy concoction in the New York summer heat has definitely piqued my interest: When did it get so popular? Why is it always entrenched in some sort of line drama? And why does everyone in New York seem to be holding a cup of matcha these days?

Well, let's see if we can unpack some of the tea.

What is Matcha?

Matcha is a very specific type of green tea that's finely ground into a bright and verdant powder. Of course, there are a couple of qualifications for green tea to be considered matcha: it must be made from the *Camellia sinensis* varietal, grown in the shade (at least 2-3 weeks before harvesting), steamed and dried without being rolled, and then ground to a fine powder. When prepared correctly with minimal oxidation, the color is a bright green with a strong umami flavor. The earliest origins of matcha can be traced back to ancient China, before taking root and evolving into a culturally Japanese practice starting in the 9th century.

I talked to my good friend Kelly Franson (@matchaandmoi) who shared a bit of insight on the rise of matcha over the last couple of years. She started her online journey with matcha back in 2019, creating this page as a small joke amongst friends and as a way to document the different matcha cafes around the Bay Area. She mentions that the rise of matcha was linked to the pandemic.

A close-up photograph of a vibrant green matcha liquid being poured from a glass pitcher into a clear glass. The liquid is thick and creates a frothy head as it fills the glass. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

So, if we've been
consuming matcha for
hundreds of years, why
has it suddenly become
so popular?

Overconsumption

After the Covid-19 pandemic forced the world into functioning virtually, there was a rise of new influencers in specific niches. Going beyond simply “food and travel” or “fashion influencers,” you now had “tinned fish experts,” “Trader Joe enthusiasts,” and of course: matcha influencers.

Franson attributes the rise of the home cafe cultures, health conscious drinks, and American beverage consumption to be some of the reasons that pushed matcha to the forefront. A relatively calming and peaceful activity, the aesthetic green color whisked by a beautiful bamboo chasen, inevitably caught the eyes of many people who were interested in this morning ritual — and it caught on like wildfire.

As anyone who's had to line up in a SOHO popup knows, once the internet has decided something is a trend, there's really no turning back.

Within the last year, reports of matcha flying off the shelves from people buying “25 tins at once” while store owners have mentioned their matcha sales soaring to an “insane 250%.” This in congruence to the yen being weaker than the dollar in the last couple of years has pushed people to travel and vacation in Japan more than before.

Matcha Influencers

What most influencers seem to realize after years building up a platform based on view count, engagement and audience retention, is that the work they used to build their business isn't sustainable. Naturally after some time away from social media and seeking the counsel from other influencers, they began to invest into their own business ventures, with a good number of them recently turning to matcha.

Some of them have done their homework like YouTubers Ashley Alexander (@urmomashley Ashley) or Joe Lee (@justjoelee), and have built a solid product that's been relatively well received by the public. Other companies like Poda, seemed to jump on the matcha train, but have not only created a questionable product but have also managed to offend the online matcha community. In a now deleted Tiktok, founder Mujtaba Waseem said “Let's make matcha, but we don't need any of this crap,” while pushing aside matcha powder, a bamboo whisk, a strainer, and a bowl — all essential parts when preparing ceremonial grade matcha. Furthermore, he goes on to say “Most matcha powder is a scam, Let me explain: most matcha is stale, clumpy, and made in China,” implying that only matcha from Japan can be premium grade quality. Mega yikes — but this brings me to my next point.



Cultural Identity

Matcha is and forever will be inevitably intertwined with Japanese and Chinese culture. In an ideal world, people would be respectful about the origins of food and seek to learn how to appreciate them; however, people have different palates. We have picky eaters. Because of this, food and beverages have had to change time and time again.

Let's look at the origin story of the Caffé americano. The invention of this now standard drink is heavily attributed to the fact that during World War II, G.I.'s in Italy had to have their espresso diluted with hot water to match what they were accustomed to drinking back in the United States. Regardless of whether that is true or not, Italians widely frown and look down upon americanos, referring to it as "dirty sewage water," but it's widely enjoyed by many (including myself) and is so popular, it's considered the unofficial coffee order of South Korea.

In terms of recent American pop culture, it's been exciting (and occasionally frustrating) to see matcha go from being available only in Asian establishments to corporate chains like

Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts — or if you're in New York, Blank Street Coffee.

I asked Franson whether she thought matcha would be a trend or if it would be around for good. She remains optimistic, saying that "Drinking habits are pretty sticky." In comparison to food trends, she notes that people's beverage consumption habits are a bit harder to change. In recent conversations with matcha companies, she mentioned that the supply chain of matcha companies are just beginning to be built out to meet the rising demands, and that this is an avenue that the Japanese government is investing heavily in.

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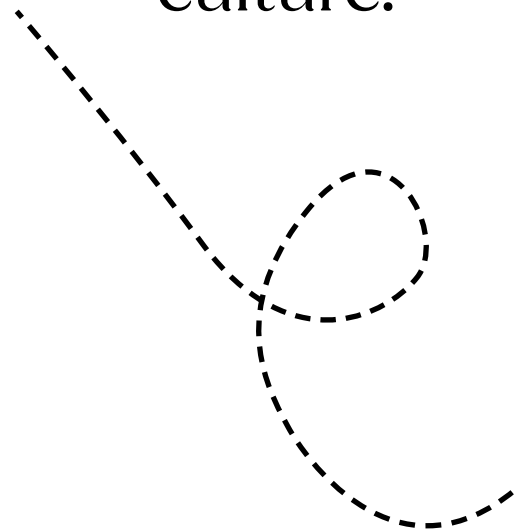
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Out of curiosity, I myself went to try Blank Street matcha after being influenced by Tiktok (the blueberry edition and the strawberry shortcake edition — because I couldn't get myself to want to try a PB&J matcha). While the drink itself isn't too bad, the main flavor profile is pure sugar. If I were to close my eyes and taste, I'm not even sure that I could identify matcha as one of the flavors!

In my conversation with Franson, she noted that American matcha consumption has quickly taken a life of its own, in a way that's completely separate from Japanese matcha culture. In her experience, matcha isn't something that's consumed so regularly as it is in the states, nor is it often associated with heavy additives like milk or other flavorings. In many cases it seems like the matcha quality or taste is heavily masked by sugar and syrups, with a lower grade of matcha. For better or worse, this is the version of matcha that has been presented to the general public.

Performative Matcha

Like trends, even with matcha madness, it was only a matter of time before it evolved into a personality trait, a green flag (if you will) by many. In other words, “she’s not like other coffee girlyes. She’s cultured. She drinks matcha.” However, as many matcha influencers turned business entrepreneurs soon learned — you cannot discard the cultural components and take short cuts in this process. When Houston pop-up Matcha Girl went viral for their batch brewed dull colored matcha drinks, while charging a steep price of \$11, the internet decided to call it cultural appropriation.

Recently, an article by The Cut, titled “It Must Be Nice to Be a West Village Girl,” named matcha as part of the West Village local uniform: “a white tank, light-wash jeans, and Sambas, an iced matcha latte in hand, and hair slicked back into a tight pony tail.”

Ultimately, the main takeaway from the article is the sobering reality that the West Village is losing its charm and character — in other words, gentrification. Suspicious corners where people used to get Jell-O shots and piercings have now been replaced with brunch places that you’d bring your parents to — and to top it all off, somehow matcha has also become an “it” item. The article mentions West Village corporate establishments like Blank Street or Magnolia Bakery selling matcha (or matcha flavored items) in the neighborhood, to fit the lifestyle and aesthetic.

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#Matchatok

And this isn’t limited to the West Village Girlies! For worse or for worse, matcha has also become a personality trait for men. #Matchatok has tons of shirtless men posing while they make or get their matcha. Granted, the internet has always liked hot people doing hot things, but can I just say — the way matcha thirst traps have risen the ranks has got to be studied.

With all this being said, I can say that I’m still relatively happy that matcha is having its moment in the limelight. Those who enjoy the taste and health benefits or the cadence of having a morning ritual will continue to make matcha for years to come, while trend seekers will move on to the next beverage.

According to Franson, “matcha is here to stay.” It’s clear that the global demand is there and it’s waiting for the supply to keep up. Japanese companies are looking into growing and producing matcha in the states, searching for climates similar to Japan and are suitable for growing and producing high quality matcha.

As for me? I definitely won’t say no to an iced mango matcha latte, but for my mornings, I think I’ll stick to my black coffee. As Franson said, beverages are a sticky habit.