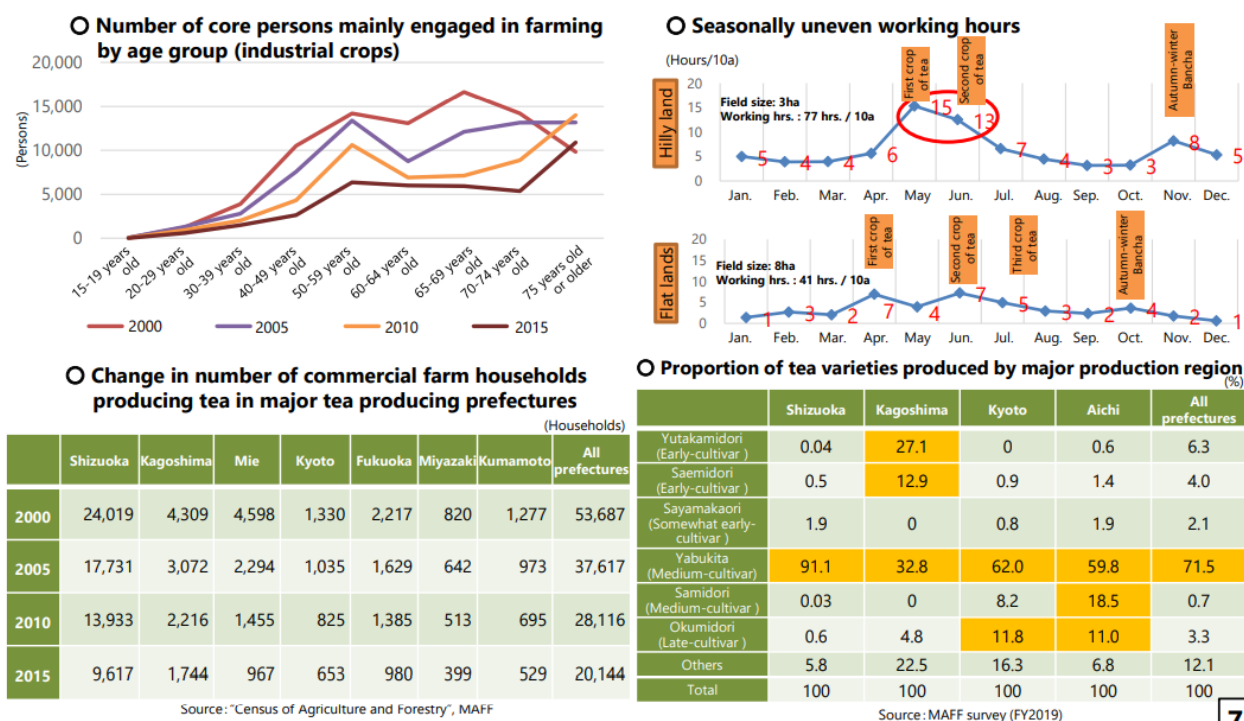


The Japanese Tea Industry & the Many Challenges it is Currently Facing

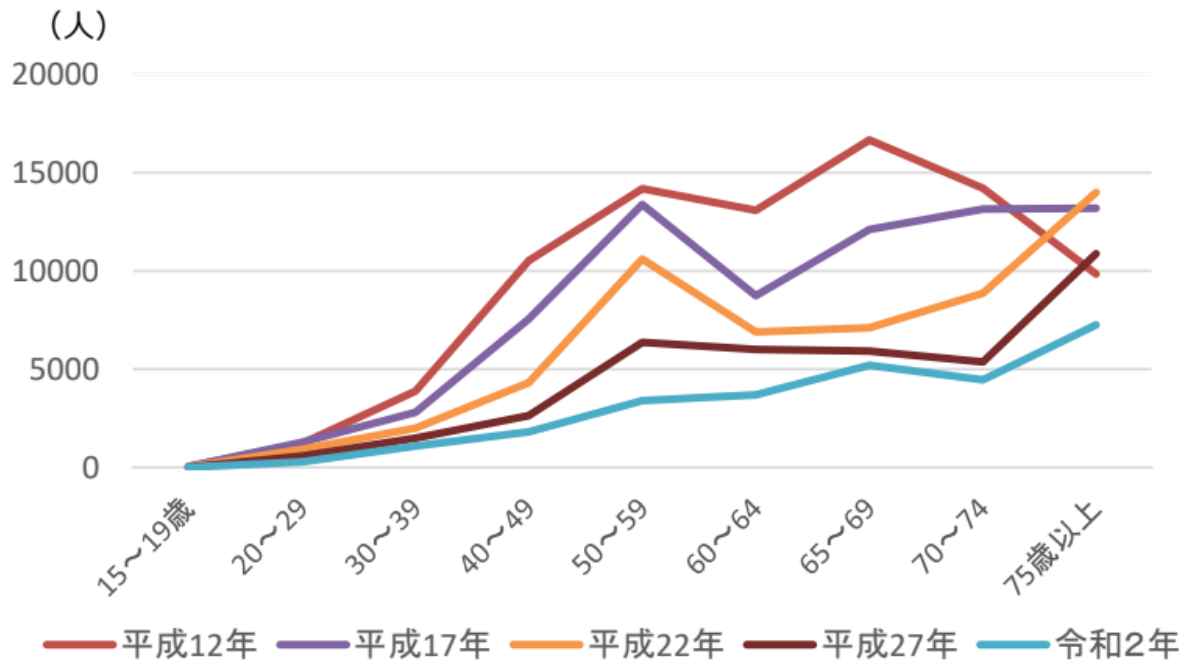
Japanese tea is facing many challenges; younger people are moving to coffee, consumption is going down, tea is changing shape and being consumed mostly from bottles rather than being prepared in the traditional way with tea ware like the Kyusu. Tea production has fallen 30% in the last 15 years and younger people don't want to take up tea farming as a career and every year, fewer and fewer people are willing to work in agriculture and in rural areas. Without the next generation joining the industry, tea farmers are getting older. In the last 20 years, 4 out of 5 tea farmers have stopped farming tea. When looking at the trends over the last 20 years, in 2000 there were 53,687 households that produced tea in Japan; it went down to 20,144 in 2015; and down again to 12,325 in 2020.

According to the census taken by MAFF, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the number of farmers over 75 years old was slightly over 10,000 (around 12,000) in 2015, dropping to slightly over 5,000 (around 7,000) in 2020. Farmers over the age of 65 years older went from 56% in 2015 and 62% in 2020.

With farms that are located on hilly land, the job gets even harder for the older farmers age 65+ because using the agricultural machinery is difficult even for the younger people they may work with, working hours are uneven depending on the season and the workload during the picking season is often strenuous. As a result, some regions try to spread the picking season out to avoid overworking, injury etc by introducing early cultivar and late cultivar varieties.



【年齢別基幹的農業従事者数（工芸作物）】



(Note - this is the same graph located in the picture above only the translated version stops at 2015 and this one goes through to 2020 which displays my included stats more accurately) - the light blue line, the one that is called "令和2年" is 2020.

Tea farming is very physical and as a result it is a lot of hard work, with the price of teas falling and the low regard for tea deomentionally in Japan, the younger people are pretty reluctant to engage in tea farming and take over the farming and production.

Most choose instead to take a job in the city because they have learned that a better and more constant return will come from that. Within Japan, sales of bottled tea are skyrocketing while loose-leaf tea sales are consistently shrinking. Younger people no longer take the time / have the time to make fresh-brewed tea and you won't find traditional Japanese tea ware in their houses or apartments. It does not match their contemporary high-paced lifestyles and their main goal is convenience and being able to consume tea while they are on the go or at their desk. There is even a word for this in Japan now, ochabanare (お茶離れ), which means "leaving tea trend," which describes simply the ways in which young people in Japan are behind leaving the traditional tea culture and no longer drinking loose leaf tea or preparing matcha traditionally.

There are some young innovators out there who are trying their best to evolve tea and take over the farms but that number is on the lower side. The work they are doing however is incredible and I would like to hope that it will inspire other young people to do the same.



Because today's generation isn't learning from their grandparents or parents how to prepare tea, the pressure is falling on the farmers and producers to try and find a way to market their teas in more innovative ways, to provide exposure that is more modern and fashionable. Working in a way that they may have never worked before adding an extra level of work and to a job that already involves a lot of hard work.

I've heard news of some tea farms across Japan that are supplementing their incomes by creating tours that include walking through tea gardens, picking leaves, processing tea leaves and drinking tea. Others are partnering with hotels, hot springs, bath houses and spas to help create a full immersive and relaxing experience. Others provide tea to be used in foods like cookies, sweets, noodles and more as well as providing tea to be added to things like lip balm face masks and other beauty products to promote tea, bringing back that interest and reaching a wider audience.



According to Allied Market Research, the ready-to-drink tea market is expected to reach \$38.96 billion globally by 2027 at a 5.5% compound annual growth rate. Not only will this affect certain areas of the speciality tea industry because farmers will turn to producing teas that are lower in grade to cater to that market. Of course, this will affect the overall production numbers of the specialty teas from Japan that we all have so much love for, but it will also cause a huge uptick in the use of single use plastic and the last thing we need in the world is more single use plastics filling up landfills.

The already decreasing demand and lowering numbers of farmers paired with the lasting effects of the pandemic has drastically affected the overall market price of the tea. 2020 was undoubtedly the worst year in terms of a price drop with prices for tea in Kagoshima falling by 13%, falling to around 1336JPY - per kg and prices in other areas for example Shizuoka falling 3% to around 1453JPY - per kg, which is no.1 in both tea cultivation area and tea production volume. In 2020, Shizuoka produced 25,200t of tea or about 36% of the national total, although this is currently challenged by Kagoshima. While only a small amount of the tea produced in Japan is organic, 41% of all organic tea is produced in Kagoshima, Kagoshima also uses a large variety of cultivars; while Yabukita is a dominant cultivar throughout Japan. In Kagoshima, it only makes 32.3%, followed by Yutaka Midori (27%) and Saemidori (13.1%).

Export trends however went up in the last five years and now around 6% of tea produced in Japan is exported. However, even with growing levels of popularity, many people outside of

Japan still find it difficult to find authentic high quality Japanese tea and accurate information about it. It's clear that going forward the Japanese tea industry is going to need to focus a lot on exporting their tea alongside trying to repopularise it domestically. A lot of this will fall upon the shoulder of the farmers but there are groups like the Global Japanese Tea Association that are working hard to open the world of Japanese tea up to many across the world and also to champion the tradition and the world of speciality tea within Japan by organizing events, providing access to education and more. There are also multiple ways in which we the speciality tea lovers in the world can help as well.

First consider researching the tea companies you are buying from and make sure they are paying the farmers a fair price, that they are treating them kindly and not taking advantage of them to make a quick buck. This will ensure you are sourcing true high-quality teas and helping farms stay in business. You can also help the people close to learn about high quality Japanese tea serve them at events etc. Do your own research into the industry and see if there are ways on which you could use the skills you have to help, i.e. translation skills that could help farmers transform their websites and aid them in breaking into the international market without that language barrier thus increasing export numbers. Post about the teas you love online via social media or blogs and open people all around the world up to just how much the world of Japanese tea has to offer.

I highly recommend reading books about Japanese tea and the traditions that surround it and of course joining the Global Japanese Tea Association who offer courses at multiple different levels. They hold events like their Japanese tea marathon and their most recent run of meet the farmer events that enable you to talk with farmers directly. Be sure to sign up to their monthly newsletter that is constantly jam-packed with information about the industry, ways in which you can help and lots more. It's truly a font of knowledge and a must have resource for Japanese tea lovers. The options are almost endless and together with industry professionals we can all help revitalize the Japanese tea industry.

Kimberley Kyusu May 2022