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Matcha green tea tipped as luxury flavour of the future

By Anthony Fletcher in Frankfurt

17/11/2006 - **A Japanese firm is confident that a traditional form of green tea is about to take off as a luxury flavour category in Europe.**

Aiya, which has its European head office in Vienna, was at HIE in Frankfurt this week to promote its range of matcha tea ingredients, which it believes has huge potential in a number of food categories.

Matcha, which is used in Japanese tea ceremony and has been drunk for centuries, is different from traditional tea in that it is not infused but ground. It is also grown differently, and is noticeably more expensive.

"With [green tea](#), you usually make an infusion," Thomas Groemer, managing director of Aiya Europe, told FoodNavigator.

"This means that you get about eight per cent of the tea and leave 92 per cent still in the tea leaf. The reason for this is that green tea is very astringent and bitter.

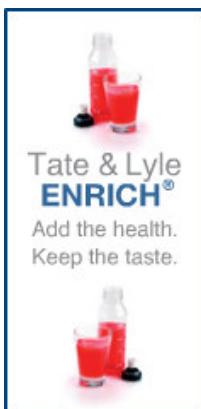
"With Matcha, instead of infusing the tea, the leaves are ground by a stone into a powder. In effect, you are literally eating 100 per cent of the tea."

What makes Aiya interesting is that it is promoting macha primarily as a luxury tea flavour, or in other words a premium food and beverage ingredient. Groemer says that the cost of the cheapest matcha starts at where the most expensive green tea stops. The company is clearly placing the ingredient in the luxury flavours category.

The company's strategy is to concentrate on markets it sees as easily accessible in particular, France, Italy and the UK.

"Italy and France have long traditions of [gourmet](#) food," said Groemer.

"They see matcha as being in the same league as champagne and truffles. If it's tasty, then they'll pay for it."

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The UK of course has a long tradition of tea consumption - it is one of the country's culinary traditions that defines it in the eyes of others. But it is also a country with a growing coffee habit, and it is this, Groemer thinks, that will open opportunities for matcha.

"In North America, matcha is being sold in Starbucks as a sort of 'healthy coffee' alternative. The matcha frappe is the new trendy drink, and the ingredient is visible in numerous smoothie chains.

"We think that the UK is the next market for this. London has the highest concentration of Starbucks anywhere in the world. And more and more people are into smoothies, fresh ingredients etc."

As for specific sectors, Groemer identifies dairy as the number one target. Two new matcha products have just been launched in Switzerland, and another product has been launched in Germany. Groemer also identifies French and Belgian chocolate as another possibility.

Matcha green tea also has obvious health implications. Consumer awareness of the health properties of green tea has become fairly well established, and is backed up by a number of studies.

A Japanese study earlier this year for example found that Japanese adults drinking five or more cups of green tea daily were 16 per cent less likely to die from a range of illnesses, and particularly heart disease, than those only drinking one cup per day.

The study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, assessed more than 40,000 people aged between 40 and 79 for up to 11 years. The study said however that it found no significant association between green tea consumption and death from cancer, a link that has been often suggested.

Knowledge of the health properties of matcha tea is certainly not new. Over 800 years ago, the tea was prepared by Zen Buddhist monks to help them meditate. These monks had the concept that all medicine should be powder, and believed that the powdered leaves of the matcha had powerful properties.

It is not just the process that sets matcha apart. Matcha tea fields are covered in shading for three to four weeks before harvesting, allowing the leaves to develop high levels of amino acid, which in turn makes them taste sweet.

This masks the bitter flavour of the polyphenols, which are nonetheless still present in the tea. *"Lots of people who don't like green tea like matcha,"* said Groemer.

Aiya imports matcha directly from Japan, which it then stores in Vienna before being distributed across Europe. The company says it owns 70 per cent of the global matcha market and claims to be the only one that specialises in food-grade matcha.

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