

# MATCHA MAGIC: FROM ELUSIVE TO EVERYWHERE

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Image credits: Dr. Malini Saba

Derived from the leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant, matcha which has its origins in Japan is definitely having a moment. From sandwiches to smoothies, muffins to macaroons and cookies to cocktails, matcha has become ubiquitous indeed. For the uninitiated, matcha is a Japanese green tea powder derived from tea plants grown in the shade. These plants (*Camellia sinensis*) are specifically grown in the shade for a few weeks before harvest and once harvested, they are steamed, dried and then ground into a fine powder using stone grinders.

## ROOTED IN TRADITION

It is key to note that consuming this green tea powder has been a revered tradition in Japan from centuries especially with the Buddhist monks. Matcha comes in various grades including ceremonial, latte and culinary grade. The ceremonial grade is often considered to be the most superior quality and offers the most authentic matcha experience. It is known to be rich in L-Theanine and caffeine which helps give the body a sense of calm, a quality which helped monks during their long meditation sessions. “Its roots in Japanese tea ceremonies add an element of mindfulness and gives it a ritualistic character which is appreciated by food connoisseurs today” says Chef Reetu Uday Kugaji, Culinary Expert & Chef Consultant.

Good quality matcha is recognized by its vibrant green color and fine texture. When mixed with water, it turns velvety, has a rich consistency and a creamy mouthfeel. “I personally enjoy it for that calm focus it brings, especially on long workdays. Just sitting down to enjoy a cup of matcha is in itself a kind of therapy. It is a chance to pause, breathe and be present” says Dr. Malini Saba, a passionate culinarian, author of the cookbook “The Abbreviated Cook,” and founder, Saba Family Foundation.

## UNIQUE FLAVOR PROFILE

Exposing the plants to shade gives the leaves its characteristic bright green hue due to the heightened presence of chlorophyll in such plants. It also gives them a distinctive flavor characterized by slightly sweet, nutty notes with a hint of bitterness and a rich, savory, umami flavor in the end. The shade is known to enhance the natural amino acid called L-theanine which lends matcha its signature umami depth. “Matcha is not just finely ground green tea leaf powder. It is this beautiful, bright green ingredient that you whisk into water or milk, and unlike regular tea, one actually consumes the whole leaf, so it is a lot more potent. I think what makes it so popular, honestly, is that it is really interesting. The color is so striking; you almost want to put it in everything just for how it looks! And then the taste; it is this lovely earthy, slightly sweet flavor that feels very natural and calming. I also believe people today are looking for experiences, not just food, and people are drawn to matcha for all of those reasons together—taste, tradition, a bit of artistry, and of course, it photographs beautifully too!” adds Dr. Saba.



Image credits: Dr. Malini Saba

## VERSATILE INGREDIENT

The burgeoning popularity of matcha today makes it an ingredient that is much sought after globally. While the traditional classics like matcha lattes, iced matcha and bubble tea are well known, this magical tea powder finds its way into puddings, sandwiches, smoothies, muffins and even yoghurt. Yes, match mania is real! “I have tried matcha pancakes that were so good I did not even want maple syrup on them. Chefs mix it into pasta dough, use it in salad dressings and also sprinkle a bit over seafood. I once had matcha cream cheese on a bagel and it was unexpectedly delicious. It is a versatile ingredient that gives a subtle, sophisticated flavor that plays well with sweet and savory dishes” adds Dr. Saba.

Add a dash of matcha to almond pound cake or tea cake cookies or even to white chocolate mousse; you are sure to have a winner. Matcha pancakes as well as matcha and banana overnight oats are healthy yet flavorful breakfast options while matcha noodles, hummus as well as matcha salad dressing are great ways to use it in savory dishes. Blend it into smoothies and health shakes for a creamy, earthy boost or mix it with yogurt or chia pudding for wellness bowls. “As a chef, I find matcha incredibly versatile and layered, it is grassy, earthy, slightly bitter, yet has a creamy nuttiness that makes it pair beautifully with both sweet and savory elements. Matcha’s slightly bitter edge balances sweet ingredients like white chocolate, condensed milk or cream cheese creating sophisticated, balanced desserts” adds Kugaji.



Image credits: Reetu Uday Kugaji

## SUITABLE FOR INDIAN CUISINE

It is key to note that matcha has gracefully woven itself into the fabric of Indian kitchens as well, inspiring a wave of culinary innovation. “Matcha is not here to replace our flavors, it is here to blend, uplift and reinterpret them. Imagine the delicate richness of a *rasmalai* or *rasgulla* infused with matcha, or the familiar warmth of *suji halwa* carrying a gentle earthy twist. From matcha *shrikhand* and *sandesh* to *peda*, *kulfi* and *kheer*, this vibrant powder blends effortlessly with our beloved *dal*-based desserts. It finds harmony in *malai* toast and even festive *modaks*. Move beyond sweets, and you will discover matcha in savories too, think matcha *paneer tikka*, *dhokla*, *cheela*, or a soothing matcha *khichdi*” concludes Kugaji.

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