JAPANOMARS

What Matcha Buyers Heard at the International Matcha Congress 2026

Thursday, November 12, 2026 ／ Yaesu, Tokyo ／ Hosted by the International Matcha Association (IMA)

IMC2026 was the first international conference held by the International Matcha Association, a non-profit association founded in Tokyo in April 2026. Growers, processors, tea wholesalers, overseas cafe chains, researchers and government officials took part. According to the MC and speakers, more than 1,000 people from 27 countries attended. The theme was building an ecosystem for the global matcha industry, and IMA plans to hold the congress again in the coming years.

I attended as a general participant, as a supplier who ships Japanese matcha to cafes abroad. This report is for cafe owners and matcha brands planning their 2027 buying: what was said, and what it means at the buying desk.

- **Opening dialogue:** Ryo Iwamoto (IMA Representative Director) and Norikazu Suzuki (former Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries)
- **Matcha today and the industry's challenges:** Japanese tea companies including ITO EN and Kyoei Seicha
- **The future of matcha, seen from the cafe market:** Blank Street (US, UK), Onyx Coffee Lab (US), Super Matcha (Korea), Gail's (UK) and others
- **The many values of matcha:** UC Davis Global Tea Institute and others
- **Ecosystem dialogue:** Future Food Institute (Italy) and others



Panel: Matcha today and the industry's challenges



Speakers from the cafe market panel



Panel: The many values of matcha

Four things to know

1 Matcha is becoming a staple

Tea companies described it as moving from a boom to a fixture after coffee and black tea. Blank Street said it serves about one million matcha drinks a month.

For buyers: plan for steady demand, not a spike.

2 Supply is the bottleneck

Shrinking acreage and growers leaving were raised by every company in the industry session. No price figures for 2027 were given on stage.

For buyers: committed volume beats chasing price.

3 No shared yardstick for quality yet

There is no common definition or grading. The industry will discuss and agree on one. No date was announced.

For buyers: grade names do not travel; ask for facts.

4 Customers ask where it is from

At IMA tastings in New York, Los Angeles and London, ordinary customers asked about origin, processing and growers.

For buyers: have the story ready for the few who ask.

Compiled by Hiroshi Asami (Japanomars) from what he heard at the venue and partial recordings. Remarks are paraphrased summaries, not exact quotes; company figures are as stated on stage.

1 Demand: from boom to staple

The tea industry panel was clear that matcha is becoming a staple and is unlikely to disappear. Several speakers called it a third choice after coffee and black tea. Kyoei Seicha traced the timeline: matcha spread in Japan as a food ingredient more than a decade ago, and that spread went worldwide in the last two or three years, the point at which, as the moderator put it, consumption jumped everywhere at once.

What the cafe chains said

Company	What they told the room
Blank Street US, UK	About 110 stores and about one million matcha drinks a month. Coffee in the morning, matcha after lunch: an afternoon drink people come in for with friends. In the UK, a weekday visit is almost an alternative to the pub for young customers, so new stores are designed for spending time together. Serving classic matcha at a high standard across many busy stores is hard to run. The industry, it said, is still in its first few innings.
Onyx Coffee Lab US	Matcha on the menu for four to five years, first treated as a stand-in for espresso. Its pilot store has served single-region micro-lots as tasting flights for about a year, modeled on a pour-over bar. It expects single-estate matcha to keep growing online, in store and in sales to other cafes, and sees matcha as an easy entry ticket into specialty drinks: a whisk and hot water, against a grinder and brew guides for coffee.
Super Matcha Korea	A minimal grey flagship in Seoul that lets the green stand out. The peak is after lunch, with sweet lattes and matcha baked goods; matcha is positioned as a dessert for now, as a way in. Its goal is not the best matcha in absolute terms but the best quality for a matcha latte, with good flavor, a good menu and a good price.
Gail's UK	More than 200 bakeries. Matcha is the first genuinely new flavor palette in years of clean-label development, opening new occasions and channels. In a UK tea market fixed in how people drink it, matcha could lift tea as a whole.

Other demand notes

- The entry point is a sweet, familiar latte (strawberry shortcake in the US, white chocolate in the UK). Regulars then move toward classic matcha with more umami.
- A researcher noted that a few years ago Americans named mint or chamomile as their favorite tea; now many say matcha. Another speaker expects matcha fans to branch out into sencha, hojicha and oolong.
- A coffee consultant said the line between coffee and matcha has blurred in recent months and much matcha is now sold through coffee companies, with Gen Z becoming the main consumer group from around 2030.
- Health and function (catechins and more) were named by ITO EN as a reason matcha is settling in as a staple.

What it means for your buying: demand is growing in two layers. Most volume is lattes, where you need steady quality and a reliable supply. A smaller, growing layer wants single-region matcha that shows its character. Decide which layer each of your drinks belongs to before you choose a grade.

2 Supply: the most urgent issue

Every company in the industry session named the same problem: tea acreage is shrinking and growers are leaving the business, even in Nishio, one of Japan's main matcha areas. The first goal is to stop the decline. Ideas on the table:

- Companies hiring and training people who want to grow tea, then sending them to farms.
- A "farmland bank" that pools unused tea fields and passes them to new growers.
- Processors taking on work so growers can focus on the field: Kyoei Seicha built a primary processing plant in Minamiyamashiro, Kyoto, in 2025 to take in growers' fresh leaf. ITO EN aims to carry consumer needs back to growers.
- Former minister Suzuki said the government intends to keep investing in tea and raise production. With climate change, regions may shift, and growers should learn from each other.

No price figures were given on stage. The 2026 season data, from public sources:

2026 first-flush tencha	Average	vs 2025
Kyoto, scissor-picked, season to July 31	¥17,250/kg	+22%
Kyoto, hand-picked (Uji tencha), season to July 31	¥52,275/kg	+11%
Kagoshima, first-flush market	¥13,910/kg	2.3x

Sources: Kyoto Prefecture Chamber of Tea and JA Zen-Noh Kyoto tea market division, August 2026; Minaminippon Shimbun, June 4, 2026.

Looking to 2027: in October, Kyoto's Chamber of Tea said 2026 avoided the shortages of previous years and it expects stable supply. Kagoshima reports more factories making tencha, with about one in five tea businesses planning to expand it (March 2026 survey).

What it means for your buying: supply is improving at the margin, but labor and acreage are long-term problems. Agree 2027 volume early, keep a qualified second source, and expect suppliers to favor committed accounts.

3 Quality: no shared yardstick yet

There is no common standard for what matcha is or how it is graded. Ryo Iwamoto argued that without one, good matcha and cheap matcha sit side by side at the same price, and the market rewards whoever produces the most. As new origins grow (China, Vietnam and, in future, Africa), ITO EN said consumers cannot tell what to base their choice on.

The panel's conclusion: set the rules first, then educate. IMA said it will not decide alone; the industry will discuss and agree. What a definition should rest on is still open, and no timeline was given.

For reference: IMA's June 2026 labeling guideline proposes four criteria: the tea plant (Camellia sinensis), shade-grown leaf, leaf steamed and dried without rolling (tencha), and milling into a fine powder. IMA frames it as a starting point for dialogue, not a standard. A slide at the congress listed what it does not specify, including shading days and materials, the type of tencha dryer, and stone or air-jet milling.

From the cafe side, a coffee consultant called for evaluation, scoring, standards, a definition and food safety to be built together, and Gail's said cafes need traceability and a reliable international standard to pass on matcha's value.

What it means for your buying: "ceremonial" and "premium" mean what each supplier says they mean. Until a standard exists, compare suppliers on region, cultivar, processing, harvest timing and lab results, not on grade names.

4 "Where is this from, and who made it?"

- In coffee, transparency reports showing the producer, the processing and even the price paid are common. Matcha is just starting, and the opening dialogue said buyers will also expect to see whether value reaches growers.
- At IMA's cupping events in New York, Los Angeles and London, ordinary customers kept asking about origin, processing and growers. In today's supply chain that information is hard to get.
- US consumers barely understand the brand names on a tin. What gets through is the human story: who grew it, processed it and packed it.
- Blank Street's co-founder said "maybe 95% don't care today." It still designs for the few who do, because they talk the loudest and spread the word, so it keeps origin and processing stories ready.
- Onyx said transparency is now an expectation of its audience and helps answer the question it hears most: is matcha a trend that will be gone in five years? Its high-end single-origin coffee customers have become its biggest single-origin matcha buyers.
- Super Matcha said education should come naturally: make the latte delicious first, and be ready when a customer asks.

What it means for your buying: even without naming the farm, being able to say the region, the method and the people behind your matcha gives your staff something real to say.

Your 2027 matcha buying checklist

- □ Is my 2027 volume agreed in writing, with delivery dates?
- □ Do I have a second source qualified: samples tasted, terms confirmed?
- □ For each lot: region, cultivar, processing and harvest timing?
- □ Is it milled to order, and what is the milling date on the bag?
- □ Is there a lab report (pesticide residues, heavy metals) for this lot?
- □ Which drinks need a steady latte grade, and which a regional top tier?
- □ Can my staff answer "where is this from?" in one sentence?
- □ Have I tasted the exact lot I will pour, side by side with my current one?

From Japanomars

The questions overseas cafes ask us every day, where is this matcha from and how was it made, were exactly what the room in Tokyo was discussing. Our job is to carry what Japanese growers put into their matcha, accurately, to the cafes that pour it.

Hiroshi, Founder, Japanomars

Working with us

- Japanese matcha for cafes from 5 kg per order, milled after you order.
- Growers in eight regions: Kyoto (Uji), Sayama, Ibi, Yame, Ureshino, Kirishima, Chiran and Miyazaki.
- Region and grower for each lot; samples first.
- Shipped from Japan, duties paid to the US, Canada, the Philippines, Europe, the UK, Australia, the UAE and Kuwait.

www.japanomars.com/contact-us

Sources: what was heard at IMC2026, November 12, 2026 (paraphrased); International Matcha Association, matcha-association.org, and guideline release of June 8, 2026; Kyoto Prefecture Chamber of Tea and JA Zen-Noh Kyoto, August and October 2026; Minaminippon Shimbun, June 4, 2026; Kagoshima Prefecture, March 2026 survey. © 2026 Japanomars (ThePOD Inc.)