

Stepping into a matcha cafe today, you're immediately immersed in the mellow ambiance created by the music and customers drinking matcha off to the side. Behind the counter, the workers also seem carefree, joking around with one another. The vibe of the average matcha cafe is similar to the majority of boba shops today, where they maintain a laid back atmosphere while not being as crowded as the typical coffee chain cafe. When you consider going to Japan, where matcha revolves around the tea ceremonies instead of aesthetics and social media, you can begin to notice an issue with how the image of matcha has completely changed within the United States. So now the question to ask is, how did this shift occur?

Nowadays, there's a theme of Asian foods and drinks being introduced to American audiences through social media, only to be picked up by large companies who alter it for mass appeal. When this happens within chainstores like Starbucks where they're always adding new combinations of flavors, like the "Lavendar Ube Latte" and "Iced Dubai Chocolate Mocha", the cultural techniques and traditions behind the foods are often overlooked or simplified. Social media, specifically platforms that Gen Z uses, has a major role on how these foods are advertised and shape what is considered appealing or trendy. While these large companies provide more recognition of these foods to the public, they shouldn't have to conform to social media's standards to be appreciated. Applying this to a larger scale in the world, no one should have to change themselves to be appreciated by others, especially if social media is to decide what "should" be changed.

Among Gen Z, many people already know that matcha comes from Japan due to that being one of the main appeals behind the drink itself. One detail behind the drink that doesn't face any appeal is its history before all the lattes and fruit flavor combos. Using paraphrased quotes from Diana Weil, a blog author on matcha.com, and Gregory Lewis Mcnamee, an author of food lore on Britannica, they tell us the history behind matcha and how it became the drink with the culture it has today. When green tea was introduced to Japan from China, matcha was created by using a bamboo whisk to whisk it into hot water, creating the practice of how matcha is prepared now. The drink was known for its connection to wellness and mental clarity due to the leaves providing health benefits, and Buddhist monks back then mainly drank it to allow them to stay alert while meditating. In the 15th and 16th centuries tea masters wanted to emphasize the mindfulness aspect of drinking the tea, and created a ceremonial art known as chanoyu.

Despite being so historically revered by monks and samurai in Japan, matcha was mostly only for the elite, as it was hard to produce in mass quantities for the public. As Japan developed, there were different cultivation techniques used to achieve different flavors of leaves. Leaves grown in the sun had a sour taste, while shaded leaves produced sweeter tea. The shading of the leaves also created a smoother "umami" flavor; according to Elara Hadjipateras on matcha.com it's a savory flavor.

As Japan modernized matcha eventually gained more popularity around the nation of Japan. But in 2015, matcha gained attention globally due to social media. People began praising the health benefits of the drink, but the majority of America met matcha with skepticism as they didn't like the color nor the taste of the drink. Rebecca Corbett, who is a Japanese studies librarian, wrote an article on these initial opinions of matcha published by PBS. She cites the research of multiple people who are well versed in experiences revolving matcha who stated that matcha was "a bowl of green gruel more bitter than quinine" and "...thick like pea-soup, fragrant, and not very palatable." These opinions changed around the 2020s, where social media made the bright and aesthetic matcha latte's the next trend. Naturally, with the waves of popularity, matcha has appealed towards the broader American audience by creating combinations with other flavors. Alessandra Bowen, writing for Medium, notes that "Matcha's old history and tradition have found

a new place in the heart of Gen Z” However, as matcha becomes more mainstream within the United States its popularity raises concerns about whether its authenticity and traditional preparation are being lost.

Junbi Matcha in Mountain View mixes the vibes of both coffee cafes and boba stores, creating a space revolving around recent American matcha culture. One employee, Denise Dulay curates many types of drinks ranging from traditional matcha to her own Persimmon Matcha Latte. She was first interested in matcha during its first wave on social media, but later became invested in the peace that the process of creating matcha provided her. Denise considers matcha being combined with various flavors is actually a positive into how Gen Z is adapting to the drink, and not necessarily appropriating it. She explains, “Cafes are showing their creativity and spreading their knowledge about matcha so that others can enjoy it in different ways.” Supporting her view, Keila Losa Reinoso writing for *Tastewise*, states that matcha has become popular as a coffee alternative tied to wellness. However, in another article by *Vogue* written by Devorah Lev-tov argues that “Over the last decade, in most of the U.S., matcha has become so far removed from its roots that it has become a coffee alternative at best and a TikTok trend at worst. And while these drinks might be tasty, if you’re looking for authentic, unadulterated matcha, it has been harder to find in the U.S.”

For Jessica Gee, the owner of the Junbi Matcha location in Mountain View, matcha’s popularity in social media creates both excitement and concern. Although she loves to see matcha grow in popularity she states “not everyone can provide high quality matcha.” She says traditionally, matcha is smooth and balanced, where the feeling it gives matters more than the flavor. This shift is due to social media preferring eye-catching and appealing flavors over authenticity, leading businesses to focus on social media’s standards over tradition. As a result American audiences may be introduced to a version of matcha which places stronger appearances and flavors over matcha’s original flavor and cultural background.

Now, many people first learn about matcha through social media and buy it from chain businesses like Starbucks, who create it the nontraditional way and lower the drinks quality. Social media trends have also recently contributed to a shortage of matcha in the United States. On another blog by Diana Weil for *matcha.com*, “When global demand surged, supply simply couldn’t meet it,” leading to the creation of inauthentic matcha powder. Weil explains that fake matcha lacks compounds which make the matcha smooth and health beneficial, while also stripping away the cultural significance. While inauthentic and fake matcha is a large issue, this reflects back on the preferences that Gen Z has on social media where they mainly focus on matcha’s appearance and popularity over authenticity.

Taking into consideration the sudden rise in popularity and integration of matcha within America is only one part of a broader problem: social media is defining what the standard “should be” for every person. Paraphrasing German researchers Johannes Paßmann and Cornelius Schubert, who work at Ruhr University Bochum and TU Dortmund University respectively, audiences on social media develop tastes curated for them by what they observe others do on social media. They call it “...the triangle of taste in which subjects, objects, and media mutually co-produce each other.” For Gen Z, this means following what other people have to say instead of forming their own personal opinion creates a pressure to conform to mainstream tastes and aesthetics. In the context of Asian traditions, cultural meanings, like the process behind the preparation of matcha, get reshaped to fit trends—and are ultimately forgotten. Technology journalist Kyle Chayka explains this problem in his book *How Algorithms Flattened Culture*: “...algorithmic recommendations have warped everything from visual art to product design, songwriting choreography, urbanism, food, and fashion. All kinds of cultural experiences have been reduced

to the homogenous category of digital content and made to obey the law of engagement” Chayka’s reference to “homogenous category of digital content” represents the repetition and uniformity of all social media content beginning to mix in with one another, losing all of their individuality and authenticity which is what is happening to matcha. Whether that being the flavor of it itself, the tradition of the tea ceremonies behind it, there are many beautiful aspects of matcha that are being simplified and therefore lost into a simple matcha latte within America, leading to more people not noticing the beauty behind the culture of the drink.

When thinking about Denise’s perspective connected to matcha conforming to mainstream media, it adds more complexity to the issue. She says she appreciates the modern shift, which in her words “ I feel like it's a way to kind of bring matcha to the public where it's not very intimidating and where it has familiar flavors to us. And so people just enjoy the flavors blending in with the moment.” However, Denise also notes that Asian cultures brought to America can be expected to fit a standard of which prioritizes visual appeal and attention retention, all while still remembering the background it comes from. Matcha has already become such a prominent trend and for Denise, who is a part of Gen Z, “The matcha "boom" has happened in Gen Z's time and I think it's an important aspect of our generation. Other generations loved coffee or energy drinks, but in Gen Z's time, we found a healthier, beneficial source of caffeine that is versatile. Mixing Gen Z's love of boba and matcha, interesting and delicious new kinds of drinks were made and it will remain as a staple to our identity.” This broader cultural shift, where social media shapes what is considered desirable, raises questions about how cultural foods should be approached by maintaining awareness and respect for their history and meaning, not just turning it into a trend for consumption.

The way Asian foods and drinks are presented to American audiences, due to social media, reflect a larger pattern of changing cultures for the sake of making products visually appealing and trendy. When cultural meanings become simplified and overlooked in favor of aesthetics, the products’ increased popularity allows more people to engage with the food. But should cultural products have to change in order to be accepted by larger audiences? While the problem isn’t exactly appropriation, cultural ignorance is. Assimilating matcha into American media and everyday life does not spread culture; rather, culture is reshaped by social media. Identities, in this context containing strong cultural background, should be valued for their originality and authenticity. More people around the world, and on social media should appreciate their own uniqueness and individuality rather than giving in to the pressure to conform to defined standards placed onto them. Ultimately, for matcha, this means that it should be appreciated as more than just a trend, but also for its deep cultural roots whose meaning deserves to be understood and preserved.

### **Author Bio**

Maya Lei Bagalso is a Junior at Mountain View High School who studies Design at Freestyle Academy. She’s been interested in art ever since she was 8 years old and is always looking to expand her creativity. In August 2025, she became Vice President of the SLAM Magazine club at Mountain View and officially took on the role of Design Team Lead. She’s also interested in camping and exploring nature, including rock climbing and paddleboarding, whenever she goes out with her family. When she’s with her friends, she likes dressing up and taking cute photos.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what happened and why matcha’s such a huge craze right now. From my personal observations, it seemed to have happened

during the pandemic. When people were home more, they gravitated toward matcha. Not only because of the clean caffeine it provides, but how easy it is to make at home.”... “I think what makes matcha appealing is the versatility in flavor combinations in a similar way to coffee, and just how easy it is to make on your own. Matcha became popular during this time especially, and I think popularity naturally made it into a ‘buzzword.’ “

– Jessica Gee