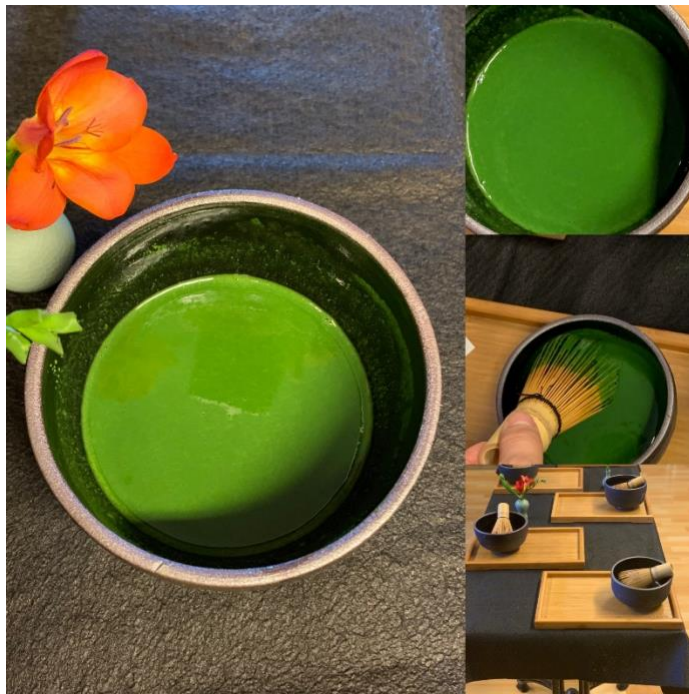


Is The Lack Of Regulations Harming The Matcha Industry?

Over the last decade Matcha has exploded on the western market. Sadly however, rather than it being because the majority love it for what it is, it is instead looked upon as a superfood fad, with most drinking it painstakingly as either a shot or in smoothies for the supposed health benefits it has been connected to over the last decade. The tea community is spread around the entire world but sadly accessing high quality teas can be hard, especially when it comes to Japanese teas and because of that the export market numbers continue to shrink year after year.

The question is would putting in place quality and advertising regulations change that and would they do more harm than good?



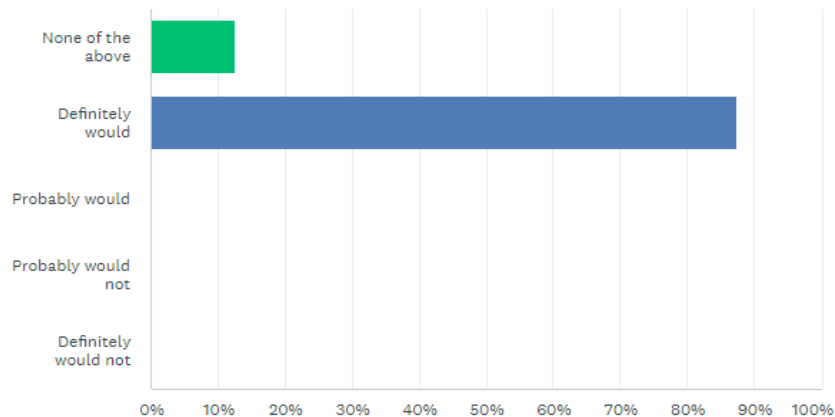
In preparation for writing this post and investigating this topic, I created a survey made up of four questions all of which had multiple choice answers and a comment box for those who chose to explain their answer in more depth.

1 - Would you support an objective standard of quality regulated by an external body, to help keep the quality of matcha consistent across the board? - This does not mean that there would only be one quality / grade of matcha, but that the quality of the different grades are as consistent as possible. The current grading system in essence means nothing and terms like ceremonial grade or premium ceremonial can be put on the packaging of the lowest grades of

matcha or even just green tea powder which is often actually made of green tea from China and not tencha from Japan.

Would you support an objective standard of quality regulated by an external body, to help keep the quality of matcha consistent across the board?

Answered: 8 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
None of the above	12.50% 1
Definitely would	87.50% 7
Probably would	0.00% 0
Probably would not	0.00% 0
Definitely would not	0.00% 0
TOTAL	8

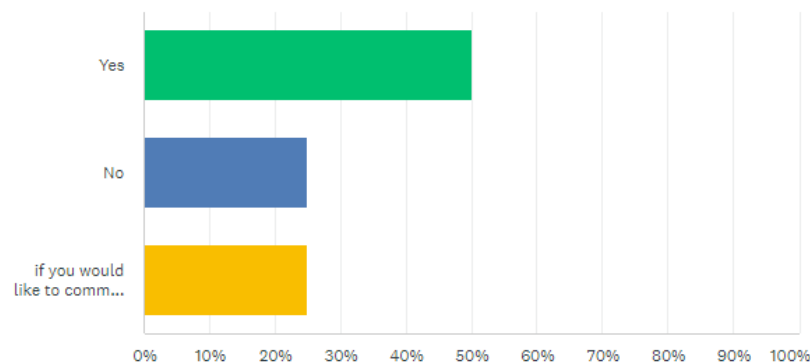
As you can see from the graph above, 87.50% of respondents said that they definitely would support an objective standard of quality regulated by an external body to help keep the quality of matcha consistent across the board. One respondent did select the none of the above answer and commented further to say that they are fine with the way things are as it allows for different grades and different price points making it more accessible as high quality matcha can be expensive, which I completely agree with because matcha does need to be accessible for the export market to stay alive. However, I think that some sort of quality gauge that would keep each “grade” consistent would not harm the accessibility of matcha, It would just have to be done in the right way.

“The best way to grow the industry for the farmers is to get low quality matcha recognized as a flavoring. In the end, drinking matcha isn’t much of a tradition in Japan. It’s a western thing. Think about that. Japanese people don’t drink matcha. It’s rarely found at supermarkets for example unless it’s for baking or for practicing the tea ceremony, not for drinking. Although you do drink matcha when you practice tea ceremony, drinking matcha is not the main purpose.” Ian Chun - Yunomi Tea

2 - Do you believe that the lack of regulations/industry standards for matcha is damaging the legacy of matcha and the traditional aspects of it?

Do you believe that the lack of regulations/industry standards for matcha is damaging the legacy of matcha and the traditional aspects of it?

Answered: 8 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Yes	50.00% 4
▼ No	25.00% 2
▼ if you would like to comment further and explain your answer please leave your comments here Responses	25.00% 2
TOTAL	8

As you can see from the graph above the answers to this question were much more mixed than the previous question. 50.00% of respondents believed the lack of regulations / industry standards for matcha is damaging the legacy of matcha and the traditional aspects of it. 25.00% of the respondents believed that the legacy of and traditional aspects of matcha are not damaged by the lack of regulation/industry standards for both quality and advertising. 2 respondents chose to explain their answers further with one following up their yes answer with this comment: Yes - because it allows high street brands to use the term matcha when describing bagged teas, with another backing up their “no” answer with this comment: There are

different qualities of matcha out on the market, as long as one understands what we're getting it shouldn't be harmful. Knowing the product depends on the customer.

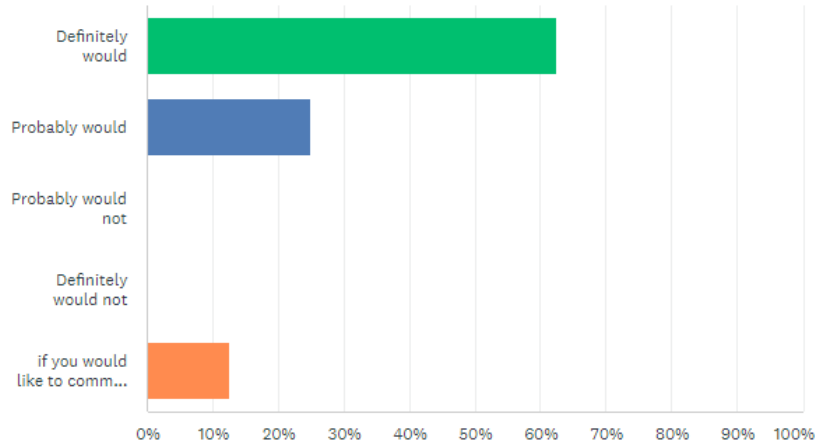
I actually agree with both of these opinions, as I've seen first hand here in the UK that there has been teabag on the supermarket shelves marketed as matcha when in reality there is no matcha in them and they are instead filled with low quality fannings, which I and many others believe is what is harming the legacy and traditions of matcha. Along with this, famous coffee chains are preparing matcha with boiling water and pumping it full of sugar. Both of these are often people's first experiences with the term matcha and because of the bad experiences they are without a doubt going to encounter with them, their opinions are then shaped on it and in turn, they will be disinterested and choose not to look into it further. Therefore they wouldn't have the information regarding the different qualities out on the market. A lot of truthful and credible matcha information is rather inaccessible.

The traditional routes of matcha, because it has been turned into a health fad, are being overlooked and I would argue that many in the west have no idea about chanoyu, unless they are ingrained within the world of tea and go searching for information themselves. Even in Japan where it's origins lie, most don't drink matcha traditionally anymore and instead use it as a flavoring in food, as the base of a latte or an ingredient within tea cosmetics. Only those who practice the tea ceremony prepare and drink it traditionally. So it is clear both domestically and internationally that something needs to be put in place to help chanoyu become more accessible and protect the traditional aspects of matcha on a whole. There are strict guidelines and rules in place for the growing, farming and processing of organic tea in Japan but matcha could and should be seen worldwide as one of Japan's most incredible teas and show off the hard work that is put into creating it is overlooked.

3 - Would you support an advertising standard/regulation being applied to the matcha industry, again regulated by an external body?

Would you support an advertising standard/regulation being applied to the matcha industry, again regulated by an external body?

Answered: 8 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Definitely would	62.50% 5
▼ Probably would	25.00% 2
▼ Probably would not	0.00% 0
▼ Definitely would not	0.00% 0
▼ if you would like to comment further and explain your answer please leave your comments here	Responses 12.50% 1
TOTAL	8

Currently my opinion is that while a quality regulation would be ideal it is not currently achievable and would take an incredible amount of work to put in place because there really is a lot to consider. An advertising standard/regulation when it comes to matcha would be much easier to achieve. Over the years I have been ingrained within the world of tea, I have run into false advertising on a number of occasions and there is nothing more disappointing than being told by a company you can expect one thing and it not being even close to what was promised on arrival. This has specifically happened with matcha and other powdered teas/tisanes on a handful of occasions and while it happens across the board with all types of tea, from my personal experiences it is clear to me that there is a trend and that this issue is most prevalent with matcha and powdered teas and something needs to be put in place to combat that.

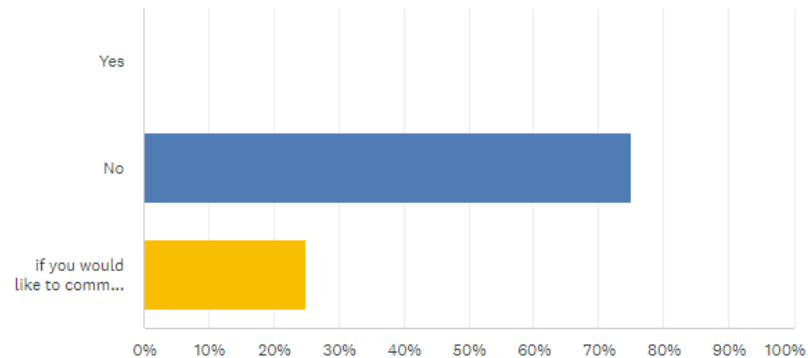
This is not me asking for only high quality matcha option by any means as all grades have their place in the market, but it is me asking for an industry standard or regulation on advertising to make sure all grades of matcha are marketed truthfully so consumers know what to expect when they part with their hard earned cash.

From the graph above you can see that 62.50% of survey respondents agree with me fully on this and chose to select the “definitely would” option. A further 25% chose to select the “probably would” option and did confirm with me afterwards that while they would support it they would need to see more in depth information on the subject before deciding to fully support it, which I understand because it is always important to make sure you are making informed decisions. One respondent chose to expand on their chosen answer and explained that they would support it because they do not want to see companies lie to consumers. Sadly, this happens more regularly than you would think and is not specific to matcha or tea in general.

4 - Do you believe that additional regulations/objective standards would damage the industry in any way?

Do you believe that additional regulations/objective standards would damage the industry in anyway?

Answered: 8 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Yes	0.00% 0
▼ No	75.00% 6
▼ if you would like to comment further and explain your answer please leave your comments here Responses	25.00% 2
TOTAL	8

From the graph above you can see that the majority of respondents at 75.00% are of the opinion that the introduction of any additional regulations/objective standards would not harm the industry in any way.

Two respondents (25.00%) chose to explain their opinions further, the first saying "I wonder if this is just a concern for western facing markets. Like, is there a real problem with consistency and quality of matcha in Japan? Or is it just people in the west calling any Powdered tea "matcha" and would regulations regarding what can be advertised as matcha be more appropriate. I also wonder, Would the external body be westerners (which maybe runs the risk of being appropriative?) or would they be matcha experts from Japan? I would certainly prefer the latter. It would feel inappropriate for a westerner to set standards for a culture we are not apart of." The second simply just left a comment saying "not sure" which I can only assume is simply due to the fact that there is next to know information out there on this subject to help inform that decision which is why I was so passionate about putting this post together.

Outside of this survey I also contacted some tea company owners to gather opinions from industry insiders.

Ian Chun from Yunomi Tea had this to say about work that is currently being done put put some form of standard in place over in Japan: "There is a new effort at creating an ISO to at least set a minimum standard for matcha; not regulating marketing terms for quality, but regulating what the product is. Although ISO is not a regulation per se. it's just a certified, internationally recognized standard."

When asked about whether or not the lack of regulations/standards in place right now affects the industry at all he had this to say: "Is it bad for the industry? Hard to say. If bitter tasting matcha is being sold at high prices, has that reduced sales for the industry? No. Has it hurt the potential growth? Hard to say. If sellers need to make that high profit margin to be interested in selling it, we may not have seen such growth with better matcha. But low quality and high quality is subjective. That's the problem. Plus it's fair to say that you label your highest quality as the highest quality. And if the highest quality matcha that can be imported formally to Europe is a 5/10 in Japan. Then that becomes the standard for highest quality".

"Positive or negative impact depends on who you're talking about, if you're talking about farmers and producers, no one has been impacted negatively by the growth of matcha. Low quality matcha being sold (whether or not the price is "appropriate") has resulted in many farmers switching their summer and autumn harvests to growing leaves for the low quality matcha. This leaf was going to fetch a low price anyway, so they aren't losing money, and in many cases they are making (a little) more. Plus the farmers won't be affected by a passing fad because in the end exports are a small part of the industry."

I then went on to ask him what he thinks would be the best thing to do given that from his point of view as an industry insider regulations and standards are not the way forward and this is what he said: "Would Japanese tea spread more if the quality was better? I don't think so. But I do think it would spread more if the prices were lower. And if it takes low quality tea to do that, then that's okay. I think someone should import on a large scale and undercut the market with a 50% margin target instead of a 75% margin. That would mean a price reduction of 50% £2.5 matcha selling at £5 instead of £10. Same quality, lower profit, and aim for market share. If the biggest producers were bigger companies instead of small businesses then they would do that".

I also spoke with Don from Mei Leaf on this subject who among many others had some great points on this subject that helped me to put this post together had this to say overall: "Overall I always lean

towards less regulation. The idea of regulation seems, at face value, to be attractive but once you get into the details they become a minefield of issues and the worst thing is to create regulations that can easily be circumvented so that you have the same products on the shelves being marketed in the same way but at higher prices. If a sustainable and effective solution can be found then I am not against regulations per se, I just don't think that the industry needs more badly thought through regulations to hinder its progress. Industry advocate associations tend to have the right intention but have to be very careful not to fall into the many traps with collective control and regulations.”.

“Last thing - tea cannot be compared with coffee. A lot of the grading/regulation ideas are imported from coffee but this shows a distinct lack of understanding of the differences. Coffee is produced across the globe and is relatively simple in comparison to tea with regards the styles of processing and types. It is more suited to some forms of standardization and grading (even though this is still subjective) can be done a lot by eye. Tea is completely different with myriad ways of producing and it is impossible to judge/test quality by eye in a meaningful way”.

What was clear to me from the responses I got from both tea community members and tea industry insiders is that opinions on this subject vary across the board but that is because of a lack of expansive information on the subject being available to those outside of the industry. I believe that if the respondents that took my survey had in insider knowledge that both Ian Chun of Yunomi Tea and Don Mei of Mei Leaf have, their overall answers to the questions I asked would be vastly different.

If anything is going to change, now is the time for that change to start and while I do not believe that regulations / standards are the only way forward they should definitely be a part of the equation. The first step is education on all levels and from there, a solid plan could be formed and in turn all aspects of the matcha industry can be protected.

Kimberley November 2022

