

Aoi's Stone Mill Carver

Toshiaki Ito doesn't aim to reinvent the wheel. But he does want to perfect it.

As the Matcha Grinding Wheel Stone Carver for AOI Tea Company, Ito is one of less than 50 remaining Masters who still practice this ancient art in Japan today. Ito creates and maintains the company's collection of hundreds of hand-crafted granite grinding wheels. "Each wheel possesses its own character. Each stone has a unique temperament and must be carved accordingly," says Ito, "They are like my children." The long and stellar reputation of AOI Tea Company rests largely on Ito's shoulders, as matcha's quality depends greatly on the grinding wheel among other factors. Granite grinding wheels, long considered the best way to prepare matcha, have been in use since the seventeenth century. The process of grinding the matcha tea to a supremely fine powder (with a talcum-like consistency) is a slow, deliberate and almost Zen-like process.

The delicate tea leaves must be protected from the burn of a fast grind which destroys the natural chlorophyll, amino acids and vitamins, robbing the tea of its bright emerald color, and rendering it tasteless. Grinding Matcha tea to perfection demands the skillful artisanship of a stone carver like Ito. Correctly ground matcha is so fine it can even penetrate into fingerprints. The granite wheels grind Matcha tea leaves (Tencha) to 5 micron powder. One set of the wheels produce about 40g (1.4 oz) of Matcha an hour.

Ito carves 1.5 mm (1/12 inches) grooves or "ditches" into each granite stone wheel. There are roughly 160 ditches on a single wheel. The granite wheel can last several hundred years. But it must be "seasoned" with time and additional carving before it is considered worthy of grinding matcha. In fact, "it takes years until the wheel is a truly good grinding wheel," Ito says. After each wheel is created, he conditions it yearly with additional carving.

With only 50 stone carvers left in Japan, Ito realizes the importance of preserving his art for the next generation, and he is in the process of documenting how he has cultivated over the years. "When I decided to become a Matcha Grinding Wheel carver, all I had to go on was part of an old sketch that was already generations old. I am prepared to pass on my skills to the next generation."

Ito is still waiting for someone to step up to the plate. In the meantime, however, he continues to hold himself to the highest standards, having yet, in his own opinion, to create the perfect wheel.