

ASIA POURS

*A root, a fruit, a leaf.
Three ingredients and the Asia behind them.*

U B E Y U Z U M A T C H A



Six cocktails. Three with alcohol. Three zero proof.
A Gen A 2026 graduation project for Asia Society Switzerland

BY SIMON ENGEL



Why a cocktail

You can try to read your way into a culture on the flight to Singapore. I found out the easier way is to order well. A drink is small enough to finish and specific enough to mean something. It names a place, a season, a farm and a trade route, and it does all of that in the time it takes to break the ice with the person across the table. Nobody has ever bonded over a slide deck.

This booklet treats a cocktail as the smallest usable unit of cultural fluency. Each of the three ingredients here carries a story that ends in a supply chain question your counterpart in Manila, Osaka or Kyoto is dealing with right now. If you know why a tin of good matcha became hard to buy in 2025, or why the Philippines earns so little from the global ube boom it started, you know something real about how these markets work and how these countries tick. The drink is the entry point. The story is what makes it memorable.

Every recipe comes in a version with alcohol, and every chapter closes with one that has none. Half the drinks in this book are zero proof. That is not a concession. Some of the best flavor work in Asian bars right now happens without a drop of spirit, and half the executives at any given dinner are not drinking anyway.

WHERE THIS STARTED

In 2018 I stood on top of Marina Bay with a craft cocktail in my hand and friends I had met in Singapore during my studies and work. It was perfect. The view, the drinks, the people. Ever since, I have been chasing rooftop bars, craft cocktails and Asia.

That night changed how I see hospitality. You need a great venue, a real concept and fine drinking, and all three have to show up on the same evening. Since then I have hunted the hidden ones, and the not remotely hidden ones, in New York, London, Berlin, Paris and Milan. This booklet is an attempt to honor the ingredients behind that, to connect culturally, and to keep experimenting.

How to use this booklet

Read the chapter, make the drink, keep the story. Each ingredient gets two pages of history you can retell at a dinner table and two recipes you can make with a shaker, a strainer and one supermarket run. Measures are metric throughout, because a drink built in ounces by someone thinking in milliliters is how an evening ends early.

Every recipe carries three notes: what to expect in the glass, a balance note explaining the technical tension in the build, and my own verdict after tasting. The first two are reasoning. The third is the only part that required buying the ingredients.

OVERVIEW

Three ingredients, three lessons

Ube, the Philippines. A purple yam Filipinos have grown for thousands of years, and the world discovered about a decade ago. The boom happened abroad. Most of the value stayed there too. Ube is a case study in what happens when the country of origin does not control the value chain.

Yuzu, Japan. An aromatic citrus from Kochi Prefecture that Japan turned into a managed, protected, high margin export. Quarantine agreements, geographical indication status, deliberately tight supply. Yuzu is the opposite case: origin as strategy. Swiss readers will recognize the playbook immediately, because it is theirs.

Matcha, Japan. Eight hundred years of Zen tea culture meeting a social media demand shock. Wholesale prices for the raw leaf roughly doubled in 2025 and a new tea field takes about five years to produce. Matcha shows what a demand surge does to an artisanal supply base with an aging workforce.

Three commodities, three governance models. One where the origin lost the narrative, one where the origin wrote it, and one where the origin is being overrun by it. If you work with Asia you will meet all three patterns, and not only in food.

THE SHORT VERSION

	U B E	Y U Z U	M A T C H A
Origin	Philippines	China, then Japan	China, then Japan
Who controls the name	Nobody yet	Japan, by registration	Contested
Value capture at origin	Low	High	Under pressure
Pressure point	Falling production	Aging growers	Five year replant cycle
The lesson	Own your name	Regulate before you sell	Scarcity is structural

Ube

Dioscorea alata. A purple yam. Vanilla, pistachio and toasted coconut over an earthy base, with a grainy texture that survives cooking.

Start with what ube is not. It is not a purple sweet potato, not taro, and not new.

It is a yam, and it carries a strange botanical fact. *Dioscorea alata* is a sterile polyploid. It does not reproduce sexually in the wild. Every ube plant alive today descends from a tuber that a human being deliberately cut, saved and replanted. There is no wild population to fall back on. The crop exists only because people kept choosing to keep it, generation after generation, for thousands of years.

The Philippines holds the world's highest phenotypic diversity of the species, the standard marker of a crop's center of origin. The physical evidence sits in Ille Cave on Palawan, where archaeologists recovered charred purple yam tissue dated between roughly 8,250 and 3,050 BCE, well before the Austronesian expansion. Root crops fed these islands long before rice did. Filipinos were cooking ube before anyone in Europe had tasted a potato.

The Jesuit who counted the yams

The written trail begins in 1613, when the first Tagalog and Spanish dictionary lists it as *uvi*. But the best early description comes from Francisco Ignacio Alcina, a Jesuit missionary writing about the Visayas between 1667 and 1670. He found ube growing in so many kinds, colors and shapes that he gave up trying to catalog them all, and recorded tubers weighing thirteen or fourteen pounds each. The large ones, he wrote, were *quinampay*, the color of mulberry. They were the chief staple of Bohol.

By 1851 a Bisayan and Spanish dictionary could list more than a dozen named varieties: *Baligonon*, *Binaesan*, *Binanag*, *Bo-ot*, *Lipayhan*, *Quinampay*, *Tamisan* and others. This was not a crop. It was a vocabulary.

Bohol is still the emotional center of the ube story, and its largest producer at around thirty five percent of national output. Its *kinampay*, native to Panglao Island and Guindulman, is called the queen of Philippine yams: red purple, distinctly perfumed, unlike anything else in the genus. Ube carried Bohol through droughts, famines and war. The crop became respected enough that tradition demanded you kiss a dropped tuber in apology. Every January the island still holds an Ubi Festival for its farmers.



Ube in the field, Bohol · AI generated

The boom that left the farmers behind

Around the mid 2010s ube went global. Its violet is the kind of color that survives compression on a phone screen, and Filipino American pastry chefs pushed it into the American mainstream. A purple gold rush, a violet revolution, a purple reign. Every headline agreed it was a Filipino story.

The money disagreed.

In 2025 the Philippines exported roughly 3.2 million US dollars of ube and ube products, against a global ube market valued at around 455 million dollars in 2024. For scale, the same country exported 2.87 billion dollars of coconut oil that year. Ube is the ingredient the Philippines gave the world, and it earns roughly one thousandth of what coconut oil does.

Most of what is sold abroad as ube is powder, extract or flavoring rather than tubers from Filipino farms. The margin accrues to processors and brands elsewhere, and inside the country it is the middlemen who profit. Ube farmers remain among the poorest.

Why supply is falling while demand rises

Philippine ube production peaked at roughly 30,000 metric tons in 2006. By 2025 it was 12,483. Demand went up. Output halved.

The mechanics are unforgiving. Ube needs eight to eleven months in the ground, against roughly three for a potato, on small seasonal plots worked by smallholders. Then comes the trap: when prices are high, farmers sell nearly the entire harvest, leaving too few cut tubers for replanting. A good year for prices is a bad year for next year's crop. Add drought, excessive rain and cuts to extension services, and the curve bends the wrong way. The Philippines has now begun importing raw purple yam from Vietnam to cover the gap.

There is a parallel problem of authenticity. A market in ersatz ube has grown alongside the real one, with purple sweet potato standing in for yam in boba shops and industrial bakeries. Purple has become a claim rather than a description.

THE COUNTERMOVE WORTH WATCHING

Bohol has applied for geographical indication protection for its Ubi Kinampay, the same class of legal instrument that protects Champagne. If it succeeds, a name on a label becomes a claim on the value chain.

Benguet State University is running variety improvement work across kinampay and four other lines, using tissue culture and aeroponics to fix the planting material shortage. One researcher there counts around 101 ube varieties in Benguet alone. Vietnam and China are scaling their own cultivation and ube biotechnology inside state supported export plans, aiming at the same gap.

Retired UP Los Banos agricultural scientist Teodoro C. Mendoza has argued publicly that the Philippine response has been mostly reactive, and that the country needs a strategic plan to control the whole value chain from raw tuber to branded export.

In the glass. Ube gives texture and color more than acid or punch, and has almost no aromatic force of its own. It needs coconut, lime and salt built around it rather than over it. Both drinks that follow use an ube syrup you can make in fifteen minutes (page 18).

WITH ALCOHOL · UBE

The Kinampay

An ube colada in honor of Bohol's queen of yams. Rich, saline, sour edged.

GLASS

Rocks glass, crushed ice.

BUILD

50 ml aged rum, ideally a Filipino rum such as Don Papa

25 ml ube syrup (page 18)

20 ml coconut cream

20 ml fresh lime juice, or calamansi if you can find it

1 small pinch of fine salt

METHOD

Shake everything hard with cubed ice for 12 seconds. Strain over crushed ice.

GARNISH

Toasted coconut flakes and a lime wheel.



The Kinampay · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

This should drink like a colada that went to finishing school. The coconut cream carries the weight, the lime cuts across it, and the salt does the quiet work of making both taste more like themselves.

Ube itself arrives late. Expect a soft, almost vanilla and pistachio sweetness underneath, and a faintly chalky, grainy body that ordinary syrups do not give you. That texture is the point. Aged rum will push toasted sugar and oak into the front, which is pleasant but competitive.

Watch the color as you build it. Ube's pigments shift with acidity, so the drink moves toward magenta once the lime goes in rather than staying the deep violet of the raw tuber. That is chemistry, not a fault.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written, and the photograph opposite is the honest result rather than the flattering one. Coconut cream makes the drink opaque, and 50 ml of amber rum drags the remaining violet toward a dusty, milky mauve. This build does not produce a jewel toned purple drink. No build with cream in it does.

If you want the color people expect from ube, split the base: roughly 35 ml white rum to 15 ml aged. That protects the hue and lets the ube through. Holding the rum at 50 ml and lifting the syrup to 30 ml is the alternative. Try the split first.

The 20 ml of lime is at the top of the sour range against only 25 ml of syrup. If it reads sharp, 15 ml of lime is the first adjustment, not more sugar.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: toasted coconut, vanilla and fragrant ube, lifted by fresh citrus and a hint of aged oak.

Palate: rich and creamy, opening with mellow ube and coconut before revealing vanilla, caramelized fruit and warm rum spice. Lime brings a bright edge; calamansi, if you find it, brings a rounder mandarin acidity instead. A touch of salt sharpens both.

Finish: smooth and gently tropical, with lingering toasted coconut, vanilla, subtle nuttiness and dry oak.

Overall: creamy, tangy and gently indulgent. Somewhere between tropical rum punch and dessert, kept honest by citrus and crushed ice.

Kulay Lilang Ginto

Purple colored gold. Named for what Philippine writers call the crop. All the color, none of the proof.

GLASS

Highball glass, cubed ice.

BUILD

30 ml ube syrup (page 18)

20 ml fresh lime juice

80 ml chilled coconut water

60 ml soda water, to top

METHOD

Stir syrup, lime and coconut water in the glass over ice. Top with soda and give it one gentle lift with a bar spoon.

GARNISH

A pinch of toasted coconut and a straw. Poured slowly, the soda leaves violet layers. Let it.



Kulay Lilang Ginto · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

Light, clean and more savory than it looks. Coconut water brings a faint salinity and a nuttiness that reads as depth without any fat, which is why it works better here than coconut milk would.

The ube sits in the middle of the palate rather than the front, giving color and a soft starchy roundness. This is a drink to serve at three in the afternoon, not after dinner.

Zero proof drinks live or die on body, and this one is deliberately built on the lean side. If it feels thin to you, that is the honest weakness of the spec rather than a mistake in your execution.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written, and the photograph opposite shows what it actually looks like: translucent, leaning fuchsia rather than violet, and faintly hazy. That haze is real ube. Around three quarters of the tuber's dry matter is starch, so a syrup made from the real thing never goes crystal clear and will throw a little sediment if it stands. Filter it through a coffee filter if that bothers you.

The thing to watch is body. Coconut water plus soda gives you very little weight, and there is no alcohol here to supply it. A pinch of salt is the cheapest fix and costs nothing in calories or color. Cutting the soda to 40 ml is the second lever. Serve it unstirred and the layers hold a minute or two, rather less if the guest walks across a room first.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: delicate toasted coconut and soft vanilla-like ube, with a fresh lime lift.

Palate: light, crisp and gently tropical. Ube brings subtle earthy sweetness and a faint nuttiness, while coconut water adds a clean mineral freshness rather than creaminess. Lime gives a bright, tart edge and the soda keeps everything lively and dry.

Finish: clean and refreshing, with lingering coconut, soft ube and a gentle citrus tang.

Overall: bright, sparkling and subtly exotic. Lightly sweet and citrus driven, with delicate violet ube notes rather than dessert-like richness.

Yuzu

Citrus junos. Lemon, mandarin and grapefruit in one rind, with a floral finish no other citrus has.

Yuzu is Chinese by birth and Japanese by career.

The fruit began as a natural cross between the Ichang papeda and a mandarin somewhere in the Yangtze basin of central China, and reached Japan by way of Korea during the Tang dynasty, more than a thousand years ago. An American plant explorer named Frank Meyer collected it in Hubei Province in 1918, at roughly 4,000 feet along the Yangtze, which tells you something about where it likes to live.

What made it thrive in Japan is unusual for citrus. Yuzu tolerates cold down to about minus nine or ten degrees, the hardiest commercial citrus there is, which let it settle into mountain regions where lemon trees die. Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku now grows roughly half of Japan's crop of about 25,000 tons a year.

An economy built on aroma

Japan barely eats the fruit. Yuzu is seedy and yields only around eighteen percent juice, with citric acid near four and a half percent, so nobody is drinking it neat. Its entire economy runs on aroma: the zest, the oil in the rind, a few drops of juice seasoning a whole dish. A tree takes about ten years to fruit properly, which is roughly nine years longer than any quarterly plan allows. This is a crop that rewards patience and punishes scale.

Its most famous ritual is not culinary at all. On the winter solstice, Japanese families float whole yuzu in a hot bath. The custom dates to the Edo period and rests on a pun: the winter solstice and a hot spring cure are both pronounced toji. The bath is said to keep colds away for a year. Nobody checks.

THE MAN WHO CRIED OVER A CITRUS FRUIT

In 2002 the Spanish chef Ferran Adria, then at El Bulli, was taken to a Kyoto style restaurant in Ginza and served a dish scented with whole yuzu rind. He asked for an actual fruit, took it in his hand and crushed it. Juice went everywhere and the room filled with the smell. According to the Tokyo culinary school head who was with him, he had tears in his eyes.

Adria went home and introduced yuzu at Madrid Fusion. Within four years Japanese exporters were fielding a surge of enquiries from French kitchens. One ingredient, one chef, one moment of theater, and a European market existed that had not existed before.



Yuzu orchard, Kochi Prefecture · AI generated

Origin as strategy

Demand is not access. Fresh citrus faces strict quarantine rules, and for decades fresh yuzu could not enter the European Union at all. Interest from French chefs meant nothing until a regulatory problem was solved.

So a village solved it. Kitagawa in Kochi Prefecture, population around 1,300, had a yuzu products business and a motive: bumper crops in 2009 and 2010 had collapsed domestic prices. In June 2011 the village and an Osaka trading company staged a tasting in Paris at a two star restaurant for some 140 chefs and critics, yuzu running through every course from cocktails to dessert. The chefs asked how to get fresh fruit. They could not.

What EU market access actually cost

A model orchard was selected, the prefecture's largest producer, and rebuilt to satisfy EU inspectors. Roughly one third of the pesticides permitted in Japan. No herbicides, so the grass was mown by hand. A ten meter buffer zone around the export block. The farm's owner called the requirements a hundred times tougher than the domestic market.

In February 2012 Japan's agriculture ministry and the EU agreed quarantine conditions for Japanese citrus. That October fresh yuzu debuted at SIAL Paris, and buyers claimed the entire exportable harvest in three days. Commercial exports began the following month.

THE CURVE, IN YEN

Kochi exports of fresh yuzu and juice: 26 million yen in 2010, 40 million in 2011, then 89 million in 2012, the year the EU opened, and 130 million by 2014. By 2022 Kochi's yuzu exports reached 744 million yen, up 74.5 percent in a single year.

The village effect was just as sharp. Participation in workshops on growing yuzu for export jumped from 48 percent of producers in 2011 to 91 percent in 2012. Where the average grower is over 70 and successors are scarce, an export market is not a margin story. It is a succession story.

Japan then locked the name down. Regional yuzu such as Kito yuzu are registered under Japan's geographical indication system, and the EU and Japan mutually protect each other's registered names under their Economic Partnership Agreement, now covering 423 indications, 132 of them Japanese. The United States still bans fresh yuzu imports, permitting only processed juice and oil. Europe has better access to the real fruit than America does.

NOTE THE CONTRAST WITH UBE

Same starting point: a beloved local crop with a fashionable moment abroad. Japan controlled the release. Quarantine diplomacy first, premium positioning through French kitchens second, legal protection on the name third, supply kept deliberately scarce throughout.

Scarcity was not a bug in the export plan. It was the plan.

In the glass. Yuzu is aromatic first and sour second, so it belongs where its perfume is not buried. Use it in long drinks, use less than you would lemon, and never boil it.

WITH ALCOHOL · YUZU

Toji highball

The winter solstice bath, drinkable. The most executive friendly drink in this book.

GLASS

Tall highball, the clearest ice you can make.

BUILD

45 ml Japanese whisky, a blended style such as Toki works well

10 ml yuzu juice

10 ml simple syrup

90 ml chilled soda water, to top

METHOD

Build in the glass over ice in this order: whisky, yuzu, syrup. Stir five times. Top with soda poured down the side. Stir once, gently. A highball is ruined by enthusiasm.

GARNISH

A wide strip of yuzu or lemon peel, expressed over the surface and dropped in.



Toji highball · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

Dry, long and aromatic. The whisky stays legible instead of being sweetened into anonymity, and the yuzu arrives as perfume in the nose before it registers as acidity on the palate. That order matters. It is what separates this from a whisky sour.

Expressing the peel is doing most of the aromatic work. The oil in yuzu rind is more distinctive than the juice, and it sits on the surface where your nose meets it first.

Serve this at the start of an evening. It is the drink in this book most likely to be ordered twice.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written, and I would not change a measure. This is the best balanced build in the booklet.

The 10 ml of yuzu against 10 ml of syrup is a clean one to one that keeps the whisky in charge, and at roughly 145 ml total liquid over ice the dilution lands where a highball should. The ratio holds if you scale it up for a group.

One technical note. Ice quality matters more here than anywhere else in the book, because there is nothing to hide behind. Use the largest, clearest cubes you have and chill the glass first. Cloudy ice from a hotel machine will not ruin it, but it will make you notice.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: bright yuzu peel and fresh citrus oils, followed by green apple, delicate honey and subtle vanilla.

Palate: crisp, sparkling and exceptionally refreshing. Yuzu brings vivid citrus acidity and aromatic complexity, lifting the lighter fruit and herbal notes of the whisky. The syrup softens the edges without adding noticeable sweetness, and the soda opens everything up.

Finish: clean and dry, with lingering grapefruit, yuzu zest, gentle ginger spice and a whisper of oak.

Overall: precise, citrus driven and elegant. Refreshing first, whisky second, with enough fruit, spice and aromatic depth to keep every sip interesting.

ZERO PROOF · YUZU

Kochi spritz

Yuzu and honey, the same pairing as Korea's yuja cha winter tea. Zero proof, full aroma.

GLASS

Wine glass, cubed ice.

BUILD

25 ml yuzu juice

20 ml honey syrup (page 18)

120 ml chilled sparkling water, to top

1 sprig of shiso, or rosemary

METHOD

Stir yuzu and honey syrup in the glass until combined. Add ice, top with sparkling water, one gentle stir.

GARNISH

The herb sprig, slapped once between your palms to wake the oils.



Kochi spritz · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

Bright and floral, with honey rounding the edges rather than sweetening the drink outright. Yuzu and honey is one of those pairings that predates cocktail culture entirely, which is why it feels immediately familiar even to people who have never tasted yuzu.

The herb choice is not a detail. Shiso is green, minty and faintly anise like, and it keeps the drink inside its own region. Rosemary is resinous and Mediterranean and will quietly relocate the drink to a terrace in Provence. Both taste good. Only one of them tells the story on the page opposite.

Slap the herb rather than muddling it. Muddling releases bitterness along with the aroma, and there is nothing here to hide it behind.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written, with a note on cost and a note on acid.

At European prices, 25 ml of 100 percent yuzu juice is roughly three francs of ingredient in a single zero proof drink, which is more than the spirit costs in most of the alcoholic recipes here. Dropping to 20 ml of yuzu against 25 ml of honey syrup gives a rounder drink and a saner cost.

On acid: yuzu runs near 4.5 percent citric acid, above lemon. Twenty five ml against 20 ml of honey syrup is on the tart side of balanced. If it puckers, add syrup before you add water.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: fragrant yuzu, fresh herbs and delicate floral citrus, with a soft honeyed sweetness underneath.

Palate: bright, sparkling and lightly sweet. Yuzu brings vivid acidity with notes of grapefruit, mandarin and lemon, balanced by the rounded floral sweetness of honey. Shiso adds a fresh green character with subtle mint, basil and spice.

Finish: clean, aromatic and refreshing, with lingering citrus peel, soft honey and fresh herbs.

Overall: light, elegant and highly refreshing. Tart citrus and gentle honey lifted by sparkling water and a fragrant herbal finish.

Matcha

Shade grown tencha leaves, stone milled to powder. Sweet, grassy, umami. You drink the leaf itself.

Matcha's paper trail begins with a monk and a boat.

Powdered tea was a Chinese invention. Under the Tang dynasty, leaves were steamed, pressed into bricks, broken off, ground and whisked with hot water and salt. Under the Song it became diancha: stone ground to fine powder, whisked in a ceramic bowl with an early bamboo whisk until it frothed, drunk by monks, scholars and the court. Then in 1191 the Zen master Eisai came back from Song China with seeds and the whisking method, planted them in Kyushu, gave some to the monk Myoe, and wrote Kissa Yojoki, drinking tea for health, the first Japanese book on tea. Monks drank it to stay awake through meditation, which remains the single most durable use case in the category.

Then China changed its mind. Under the Ming, powdered tea was abandoned in favor of steeped loose leaf, and the whisked bowl survived only in Japan. Matcha is a Chinese technology that Japan kept after its inventor discarded it.

The invention of shade, and the invention of restraint

Around the fourteenth century Uji growers developed oishita saibai, shading the plants for several weeks before harvest. Deprived of full sun, the leaf concentrates chlorophyll, sweetness and L-theanine and loses astringency. The traditional method, honzu, builds a bamboo and timber shelf above the rows, lays woven reed screens across it, then spreads loose rice straw on top: ten days under reeds, ten days under straw, ending near 98 percent shade. It takes several skilled workers days to build. That single agronomic trick is what separates tencha from ordinary green tea, and it is the reason matcha cannot simply be made anywhere on demand.

What turned a stimulant into a civilizational artifact was the tea ceremony. Murata Juko brought Zen simplicity into tea gatherings in the fifteenth century. A century later Sen no Rikyu, tea master to the warlords Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, stripped the practice to a two tatami room, rough domestic raku bowls chosen over expensive Chinese ceramics, and four principles: harmony, respect, purity, tranquility. He served the most powerful men in Japan and made plainness the ultimate luxury. His three grandsons founded schools that are still teaching today.

Every matcha latte on Bahnhofstrasse is downstream of that idea, whether or not anyone in the queue knows it.



Tencha under honzu shading, Uji · AI generated

The squeeze

Then the internet found it. Wellness culture adopted matcha as the respectable alternative to coffee, its green photographed unmistakably well, and global demand ran far past what Japan can grow. Japanese production roughly tripled between 2010 and 2023 and it was not enough.

At the Kyoto auction in May 2025 the opening tencha average reached 8,235 yen per kilogram, around 1.7 times the previous year and above the record set in 2016. That was the floor, not the ceiling. Across the season the national aggregate climbed far higher, and premium Uji lots cleared at multiples of it. Heat during the critical spring growing window cut first flush tencha production in the Uji region by roughly forty percent. Established Uji tea houses stopped taking new wholesale accounts and moved existing customers onto strict allocations. In Japan, shops began rationing to one tin per customer.

Japan's green tea exports rose about 42 percent by volume in 2025 and roughly doubled in value. The 2026 first flush auctions confirmed that prices are stabilizing at the new elevated level rather than falling back. Japanese tencha prices, once raised, rarely come back down. So far, neither has anyone's willingness to pay them.

Why it cannot simply be fixed

Real matcha needs shading, careful hand work and slow stone mills, and it comes from a handful of regions. Japan lost roughly 53,000 tea farmers to retirement between 2000 and 2020 and successors are not arriving at the same rate. A newly planted field needs four to five years before first harvest, so even an aggressive planting response now does not reach shelves in volume until around 2030. The shortage is structural, not a blip.

The market is adjusting in two directions at once. Kagoshima, with flat volcanic land and mechanized shade netting, overtook Shizuoka in 2025 as Japan's leading first flush producer after more than three decades, absorbing volume demand that Uji's hand picked hillsides never could. At the same time Uji has repositioned upward, commanding a substantial premium as a prestige origin. One crop, two markets, moving apart.

THE LABEL NOBODY REGULATES

Here is the part with immediate commercial consequences. The term ceremonial grade has no legal definition in Europe. No regulation, no certification body, no standard. Any brand can print it, and many do. It is the tea aisle's version of artisanal.

In Switzerland that produces a market where near identical tins sell across a range of roughly 15 to 80 francs for 30 grams. Per gram, the spread across mainstream Swiss retailers and specialists runs from around 0.49 francs to 2.20. The word on the front tells you almost nothing about what is inside.

Buy on stated region of origin and harvest year instead, because those are falsifiable claims. That is the whole trick.

In the glass. Matcha is a suspension, not a solution, and chemically fragile. Whisk it into liquid before it meets anything else, keep its contact with acid short, serve immediately. When you pay twelve francs for a matcha latte in Zurich, most of what you are buying is a bottleneck.

WITH ALCOHOL · MATCHA

Rikyu sour

A gin sour with the tea whisked in properly. Named for the man who made restraint a status symbol.

GLASS

Chilled coupe.

BUILD

50 ml dry gin
25 ml fresh lemon juice
20 ml honey syrup (page 18)
2 g culinary grade matcha, about one bar spoon
20 ml warm water, for the matcha
20 ml aquafaba or one egg white, optional, for foam

METHOD

Whisk the matcha into the warm water first until no lumps remain. This step is not optional. Matcha added dry to a shaker turns to clumps. Add everything, dry shake without ice if using foam, then shake hard with ice and double strain.

GARNISH

A light dusting of matcha through a fine sieve, over one half of the foam only.



Rikyu sour · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

Botanical, grassy and drier than the word sour suggests. Gin and matcha share vegetal territory, so juniper and tea reinforce each other instead of arguing. Honey bridges them.

Matcha brings tannin and umami together, which lengthens the finish and gives the drink a savory tail. The foam is textural, not decorative: it softens the tannin on the first sip. Dust only half of it, so the guest chooses between the drink and the tea. Rikyu would have found the whole exercise absurd, but he would have approved of the restraint in the garnish.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written. One real technical caution.

Chlorophyll degrades in acid. Twenty five ml of lemon against 2 g of matcha pulls the color from jade toward olive within minutes of shaking, and the photograph shows the first thirty seconds, not the fifth minute. No ratio fixes this. Technique does: build fast, serve immediately, never batch.

The 50 to 25 to 20 ratio is otherwise sound sour territory. If anything 2 g of matcha is assertive against 50 ml of gin; try 1.5 g first if yours is strong.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: fresh green tea and juniper, with lemon zest and a soft honeyed sweetness behind it.

Palate: dry, botanical and layered. Matcha gives a grassy, faintly savory depth that sits under the gin rather than on top of it, and the honey keeps the lemon from taking over.

Finish: long and green, with lingering tannin, citrus peel and clean bitterness. Overall the most serious drink in the book: dry, adult and quietly complex. Not one to batch, or to leave standing.

ZERO PROOF · MATCHA

Uji tonic

Two ingredients and a technique. The current standard zero proof serve in Tokyo listening bars.

GLASS

Highball, large ice cubes.

BUILD

2 g good matcha

40 ml cold water

130 ml chilled tonic water, to top, or soda for a drier version

METHOD

Whisk the matcha and water in a bowl until smooth and slightly frothy. Fill the glass with ice, add tonic first, then pour the matcha slowly over the back of a spoon so it layers green over clear.

GARNISH

A lime wedge on the rim. Serve unstirred and let the guest fold the layers together.



Uji tonic · AI generated

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE GLASS

The most photogenic drink in the book and the least forgiving. Unstirred, the first sip is quinine and bubbles and the last is concentrated tea. Stirred, it becomes one clean bittersweet green drink. Both are correct. Serving it unstirred hands the guest a small decision, which is the whole charm.

Tonic's quinine bitterness and matcha's tannin stack, so this leans bitter. Soda water instead of tonic gives a drier, cleaner drink and lets the tea speak. If you are serving people who do not already like matcha, use soda.

The lime is not decoration. A squeeze cuts the tannin and makes the whole thing suddenly refreshing rather than serious.

BALANCE NOTE

Printed as written, with one correction to the technique.

Two grams of matcha will not properly disperse in 40 ml of cold water. Matcha is a suspension and cold water leaves it gritty. Whisk it first into about 15 ml of water at roughly 70 degrees to make a smooth paste, then whisk in the remaining cold water. Same temperature, none of the grit.

On economics, worth saying out loud: at Swiss prices, 2 g of matcha is between one and four francs of tea in a single glass depending on what you bought. This recipe makes the shortage argument better than any chart in this booklet.

SIMON'S NOTE AFTER TASTING

Aroma: clean green tea over citrus and quinine, more restrained than the color suggests.

Palate: bittersweet and lively. The tonic pushes quinine forward and the matcha answers with tannin and a vegetal depth. Stirred it reads as one drink; unstirred it changes from top to bottom.

Finish: dry, green and slightly bitter, cleaned up considerably by the lime.

Overall: the one to serve when you want a zero proof drink that nobody apologizes for. Use soda for a first-timer, tonic for someone who already drinks matcha.

What the glass tells you

Put the three stories side by side and you have a short course in how origin, value and control interact across Asian trade. The patterns are not about food. Food is just where they are easiest to taste.

One. Origin without control

The Philippines domesticated ube, holds its genetic diversity and supplies its entire cultural meaning, and captures almost none of the margin. The value moved to whoever converted the tuber into powder, extract and brand. Bohol's pending geographical indication application for kinampay is an attempt to claw the name back after the boom rather than before it.

Where you have seen this before. Any input whose story is more valuable than its substance and whose producers are fragmented. The processing step, not the growing step, is where pricing power lives. Ask who owns the conversion, not who owns the field.

The transferable lesson. Cultural authenticity is an asset that has to be registered to be defensible. Left unregistered it becomes a free input into somebody else's product, and the counterfeit market arrives first: purple sweet potato sold as ube, sencha powder sold as matcha. Verification then becomes its own industry. Matcha wholesale buyers in 2026 are commissioning third party traceability audits that did not exist as a line item three years ago.

Two. Origin as strategy

Japan spent years on quarantine diplomacy before a single fresh yuzu reached Europe, launched through the top of the French restaurant world, registered its regional names, and kept supply deliberately tight. A crop of 25,000 tons has pricing power that far larger crops do not.

The move most people miss. Market access was a regulatory project before it was a commercial one. A village of 1,300 people rewrote its farming practice to satisfy a foreign inspector, and only then went selling. Most European firms entering Asia do this in the opposite order, discover the compliance problem after the sales pitch, and lose a year.

The Swiss recognition. Geographical indication is the same instrument behind Gruyere, Champagne and, in spirit, Swiss Made. The EU and Japan now mutually protect 423 registered names under their Economic Partnership Agreement. If your business has a place name in it, that treaty is part of your asset register whether or not anyone has told your legal team.

Three. Origin under siege

Eight centuries of craft met a demand shock it cannot absorb. Prices roughly doubled and then held, growers are retiring faster than fields can be replanted, and a new field takes four to five years to yield. There is no supply response available before roughly 2030.

The structural read. Any market with a long capacity lead time and an aging operator base responds to a demand shock through price and rationing, not volume. Allocation replaces negotiation. Relationships beat purchase orders, and the buyer who opens with aggressive price pressure gets allocated out. That is now the observed behavior of Japanese heritage tea makers, and it is the same behavior you see in constrained semiconductor and specialty materials supply.

The split that follows. Kagoshima overtook Shizuoka in 2025 as Japan's top first flush producer after more than thirty years, on mechanization and flat terrain. Uji did not compete on volume; it moved upward into prestige. One product, two markets, diverging. The same split has already happened in coffee and wine, and it always ends the same way: the volume tier optimizes cost, the prestige tier sells provenance, and the middle disappears.

Four. Color is a distribution strategy

Ube and matcha did not go global because they taste better than their competitors. They went global because violet and jade survive a phone screen. In an algorithmic feed, visual distinctiveness is free distribution, and a product that photographs unmistakably gets a marketing budget it never paid for.

This is worth taking seriously beyond food, because it has already reshaped how Asian cultural exports travel. The color palette, the object design and the single recognizable visual signature do the work that advertising used to do. Retail interiors, packaging and product design across the region are increasingly built for the photograph first.

There is a longer lineage here too. Rikyu's insistence on the rough domestic bowl over the expensive Chinese import, on the small bare room, on subtraction as the highest expression of taste, is the origin point of an aesthetic that European design has been borrowing for decades without much attribution. When a Swiss brand strips a product back to nothing and charges more for it, that is a four hundred year old argument being made again.

FOUR QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING YOUR DRINK COUNTERPART

The first three audit a value chain. The fourth is the one that actually starts the conversation, which is the entire argument of this booklet.

1. Who owns the name? Not the trademark. The place name, and whether it is registered anywhere a foreign court would recognize.
2. Where does the conversion happen? The step that turns raw material into product is where margin sits. If it happens offshore, so does the profit.
3. What is the lead time on new capacity? If it is measured in years, price is the only short term lever, and you are in an allocation market whether or not anyone has said so.
4. What is your favorite memory of this ingredient? Where were you when you tasted it properly for the first time?

None of this stays in food. Learn to spot the three patterns in a cocktail and you will spot them in a term sheet.

Sourcing, prices and syrups

Prices checked in August 2026 for Switzerland and Germany. Treat them as ranges, not quotes.

	U B E	Y U Z U	M A T C H A
Where to buy	Filipino and pan Asian grocers for frozen grated ube and jarred halaya. Powder online in Switzerland. Fresh tubers rarely reach Europe.	Japanese grocers and specialist online food shops. Fresh fruit appears in specialty produce shops from late November to January.	Swiss supermarkets for entry level, specialist online retailers for the rest. Culinary grade is the correct choice for cocktails.
Expect to pay	Powder around CHF 22 per 50 g, broader range CHF 15 to 35 per 100 g. Flavor syrup around EUR 8 per 250 ml. Frozen grated is cheapest.	Around EUR 24 per 200 ml of 100 percent juice, so roughly CHF 20 to 25 here. Bulk about EUR 176 for 1.8 liters, event scale only.	CHF 0.49 to 2.20 per gram. Supermarket near CHF 0.65 per gram, specialist 100 g packs around CHF 50. Tins of 30 g run CHF 15 to 80.
Watch out for	Purple sweet potato sold as ube, and purple that comes from coloring. Real product lists purple yam first. If it lists a color code, you are buying a costume.	Bottles labeled yuzu that are blends with lemon, sugar or citron. Check for 100 percent. Korean yuja is a sweetened preparation and behaves differently.	Ceremonial grade has no legal meaning in Europe, so ignore it. Buy on stated region and harvest year. Cheap Uji claims are the clearest warning sign.

Two syrups

Ube syrup. Simmer 100 g thawed grated ube, or 80 g ube halaya, with 200 ml water and 150 g sugar for 10 minutes. Blend, then strain through a fine sieve. Keeps one week refrigerated. If using halaya, reduce the sugar to 100 g because it is already sweetened.

Honey syrup. Stir 2 parts honey into 1 part hot water and cool. Use a neutral blossom honey so the yuzu and matcha stay in front. Chestnut or forest honey will take over the drink, and shortly afterwards the conversation.

ABOUT

About this project

Asia Pours is a Gen A 2026 graduation project created for Asia Society Switzerland. The recipes were specified and researched by the author, whose editorial judgment, rather than any generated text, is the layer that decides what is worth printing.

Simon Engel is a passionate hobby bartender and beverage connoisseur. He learned barkeeping with the European Bartender School in Cape Town and holds a WSET Level 2 in Wine. He is part of the Gen A fellowship cohort 2026, building bridges between Asia and European business.

With this project Simon intends to put his beverage skills to practical use: a guide for business travelers and executives who want something worth sharing at the table. He is of the opinion that business culture is best explained through taste and ingredients.



Simon Engel



A NOTE ON THE RECIPES

Every measure is printed as specified. Where a build carries a technical tension, whether color chemistry, dilution, cost or body, it is stated openly in the balance note rather than quietly corrected. Two of the photographs were reshoot to match what the recipe actually produces rather than what would look better on the page.

Use of AI in this project

This booklet was researched and written with the assistance of Anthropic's Claude, used as a research, drafting and editing tool: to locate and cross reference published sources, to draft and structure the narrative text, to analyze the balance logic of each recipe, and to produce the layout. All photography in this booklet, both the six cocktails and the three origin images, was AI generated to a specified art direction and is captioned as such.

Every factual claim traces to a named source overleaf. Figures were checked against primary or institutional sources where available, and market research estimates are identified as such. Where sources conflicted, the more conservative figure was used. The analogies drawn to wider trade patterns are editorial interpretation by the author, not sourced claims.

The what to expect notes are predictions reasoned from ingredient behavior. The tasting notes under each recipe are the author's own, and where they disagree with the prediction, the tasting wins.

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Figures were checked against the sources below in August 2026. Auction prices, export values and retail prices move. Verify anything time sensitive before quoting it on stage.

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