

Vince Pitelka, 2016

Japanese Terms for Teas and the Associated Drinking Vessels

This summation of different types of Japanese teabowls was generously provided by my son Morgan Pitelka, a scholar of medieval Japanese ceramics and tea culture. With minor editing, the words below are Morgan's.

The basic problem with assigning specific names to the various teabowl shapes is that three separate approaches to tea-drinking coexist in contemporary Japan, and they do not employ the same labels for ceramics. This causes a great deal of confusion among foreign collectors and potters.

The most common tea tradition in Japan is not really a codified, organized tradition at all, but rather the daily consumption of tea in almost every household in the country, where tea is prepared in conventional teapots. In everyday life, most Japanese drink *sencha* (steeped green tea), *bancha* (course tea), *hojicha* (roasted tea) or *kukicha* (stem tea). More and more also drink coffee, black tea with milk or lemon, or Chinese oxidized teas such as Oolong. These distinctions are described in more detail in the introduction of my book *Japanese Tea Culture*. Although most people drink these teas out of what we would call a "cup" in English, a variety of Japanese terms are used to describe these vessels, and they are not standardized in any way. The best term is probably *yunomi*, which basically means tea cup. The naming of things in Japan is always in flux, however.

The second most important tea tradition in Japan is *chanoyu* or the tea ceremony, also referred to (particularly by practitioners) as *Chado* or *Sado* (homophones meaning "the way of tea"). This ritualized, performative tradition is the one most potters know something about, because it is the source of so many of the styles and aesthetic innovations that influence American and global ceramics today. Chanoyu practitioners drink powdered green tea from a medium to large bowl. These are NOT cups: they are distinctly shaped liked bowls.

The third tea tradition in Japan is a more formal consumption of *sencha* or "steeped tea" that grows out of the traditional tea ceremony. This tradition became widely popularized in the 18th century when a small group of Japanese artists and intellectuals appropriated literati customs from China and invented a tea-drinking ritual to rival chanoyu. The vessels in this tradition are called *chawan* or *meiwan*, but are often smaller than chanoyu's tea bowls and look more like cups.

Here is an attempt at basic definitions of some of the standard tea-drinking vessels:

Yunomi (literally "for drinking hot water") is a tea cup, usually taller than wide and smaller in diameter than the smallest of tea bowls. Often mistakenly called "tea bowl" by American potters.

Guinomi (literally one gulp) is a very small cup, often wide with a narrow base, used exclusively for drinking sake. Sometimes imitates the shape of a tea bowl.

Chawan (literally tea bowl) is a small to medium sized bowl used for drinking hot tea (usually powdered green tea or “matcha”). Historically, shapes were limited to the following forms: conical (like temmoku tea bowls imported to Japan from China, and their Japanese reproductions); half-cylindrical (the vertical walls are not as tall as the bowl’s diameter); and cylindrical (the vertical walls are taller than the diameter of the bowl).

In Japanese, tea practitioners frequently refer to more than 26 different shapes of tea bowls, but these are difficult to translate into English and not very meaningful in a non-*chanoyu* cultural context. The important fact to note is that historically, most tea bowls were not smaller than 9 cm and not larger than 14 cm in the diameter of the mouth.

Senchawan is a bowl for steeped tea. Chinese literati-style steeped tea drinking became very popular in Japan in the 18th century and continues to have a small following in contemporary Japan. To learn more about Sencha, see Pat Graham’s book *Tea of the Sages: The Art of Sencha*.

Matchawan is a bowl for powdered tea. The term **chawan** almost always refers to a tea bowl to be used to consume powdered green tea or **matcha**, so I have always found the term **matchawan** to be highly redundant.

Banchawan is a bowl for coarse tea. **Bancha**, (coarse tea) is usually drunk out of a tea cup (*yunomi*) rather than a tea bowl, so this term also seems a bit strange. I have noticed that some potters in Japan use this term to describe their tea bowls, but the difference escapes me.