

# DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

## ‘TSUKUDANI’ TEA LEAVES

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‘Tsukudani’ is a type of popular Japanese condiment made from seafood, seaweed, wild vegetables or mushrooms flavoured thickly with sweetened soy sauce. It originated in the Tsukuda district of Edo (modern-day Tokyo), from a tradition of preserving large amounts of small seafood (e.g. small fry, shrimps and clams) available in Tokyo Bay as a standby food item.

The following tsukudani recipe uses spent green tea leaves... yes, those tired-looking leaves left behind after brewing the hot drink. Spent tea leaves actually contain more health-benefiting nutrients—such as vitamin C, vitamin K and catechins (many of which are now receiving scientific attention for their role in mitigating COVID-19 infection)—than the brewed drink itself. In addition to the nutritional benefits, the custom epitomises the time-honoured Japanese tradition of ‘waste not, want not’.

The recipe is a great way to produce ‘free’ food if you consume large amounts of tea—just keep the spent tea leaves in the freezer until you have accumulated enough to make a batch. Apart from green tea, you can also use the leaves of black or brown teas, or a mixture. The soy sauce, a sweetening agent such as mirin and/or sugar, plus a umami agent such as konbu are mandatory in tsukudani, however, feel free to experiment with additional ingredients to suit your taste—popular

ones include chopped chilli, very finely julienned yuzu (or lemon) rind, katsuobushi (bonito flakes), and finely sliced or chopped shiitake.

[IMPORTANT: As tea crops are often heavily sprayed with chemicals, both in Japan and elsewhere, please use tea that has been grown organically or with low chemical use.)

## INGREDIENTS

- Spent Japanese green tea leaves (organic strongly recommended) 1 cup
- Dried konbu seaweed (soft or 'hayani' type), rehydrated and cut into very fine strips c. 3 mm wide and c. 3 cm long (you can also use hard or 'dashi' type konbu that has been recycled from making konbu dashi liquid) Approximately 5 cm length of dry leaf
- Black or white sesame seeds 1 heaped tablespoon
- Japanese soy sauce (or tamari) 3 level tablespoons or to taste
- Mirin (or sweet sherry, sweet white wine) 3 level tablespoons or to taste

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Save spent green (or other) tea leaves in a sealed container in the refrigerator until you have sufficient quantity. Spent tea leaves will generally keep refrigerated for about 3 days. For longer storage, use your freezer, though not for longer than two weeks.



2. Place tea leaves in a saucepan. Over low–medium heat, let excess moisture evaporate while stirring for several minutes.



3. Add the konbu strips, sesame seeds, soy sauce (or tamari), mirin (or substitute) and any optional ingredients of your choice. Stir through thoroughly, cover with a lid, and simmer over low heat for c. 20 minutes. Stir often to prevent burning.
4. Once the brown colour of the soy sauce (or tamari) has infused the ingredients evenly, remove from the heat. Remove the lid and allow to cool to room temperature.



5. Once cool, store in a clean sealable container in the refrigerator, where it will keep for at least two weeks and potentially much longer. Delicious as an accompaniment to steamed rice, the traditional Japanese way of enjoying tsukudani. It also pairs surprisingly well with cheese or cream cheese on a cracker as a canapé item.



*A variation using mixed green and black tea leaves with lemon zest and chilli*