

Kyotology



本物の宇治抹茶は“畑のフォアグラ”

November 18, 2016 | Diane in Kyoto



抹茶は今や海外でも意識の高い人々に愛飲されている。スターバックスの「グリーンティララテ（抹茶ラテ）」は世界中で人気だし、ハリウッド映画の中でも抹茶そのものを飲むシーンが登場するようになった。「Begin Again（邦題：はじまりのうた）」（2014）では、主要登場人物の一人デビッドが、ニューヨークのスタジオで「That's maccha tea. Gotta like 4 million antioxidants in it. I like it. Samurai used to drink it before they went out to battle.」と言って、コーヒーの代わりに抹茶を抹茶用のお椀で飲む。パリでも日本のお茶屋さんが進出に成功し、紅茶文化のロンドンでさえも抹茶は人気だ。今日、アジアではもちろん、世界的に抹茶そのものの認知は確立されたといえるだろう。むしろ、その味や品質について吟味される時代に入るといえる。

一方、抹茶にも高品質なものから下級品まであり、抹茶と呼ばれていても抹茶とはいいがたい代物も多く出回っている。日本茶葉100%の純粋な抹茶はどこでも手に入るわけではない。ましてや、その茶葉が特別な土地で栽培され、その栽培方法も手間暇かけた特殊なプロセスであった場合、年間生産量は限られ、めったに味わえるものではない希少な商品になる。

そのような特殊で貴重な抹茶を生産しているのが京都の宇治市だ。宇治といえは、日本人なら誰でも「お茶の産地」ということは知っている。しかし、茶畑には、煎茶と玉露と碾茶の3種類があるということはおそらく知られていない。また、栽培が碾茶と呼ばれる茶葉から作られることも日本人はあまり知らない。抹茶は碾茶を丁寧に加工し、粉砕したパウダーだ。高品質の抹茶は当然緑の色も鮮やかで、いかにも生きた葉っぱのような色をしている。

宇治で茶農家を営む辻喜代治さんは、宇治でも最高品質の碾茶を生産している茶葉づくりの匠だ。明治時代に先祖がこの土地に移り住んで以来、茶葉づくりを続けており、辻さんは5代目にあたる。様々な創意工夫と努力が評価され、2016年、全国茶品評会 碾茶の部で第一位の農林水産大臣賞を受賞した。辻さんの育てた碾茶が日本一の品質であることが認められたわけだ。



では、何が辻さんの茶葉を最高級にしているのか？ よい茶葉づくりは、天候と土づくりに大きく影響される。よい抗力の部分も多いが、辻さんの土づくりや栽培方法は、サイエンスといえるほど実験と挑戦の連続である。データを取りそれに基づき予測を立て、最後は経験で得た観を働かせて気象条件に対応していく。

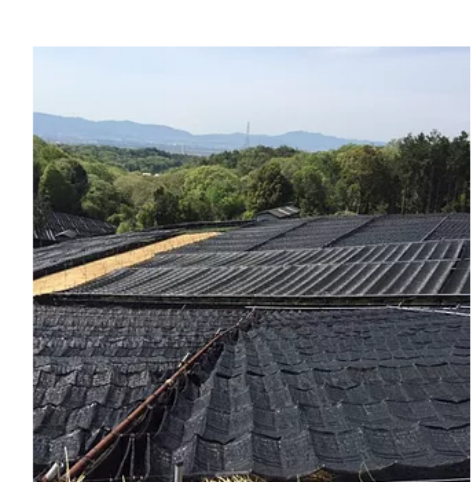
「就農27年になりますけど、毎年1年生です。なぜなら毎年、気象状況は違うからです」と辻さんは言う。「遑隔地からもお茶栽培を教えてほしいという方が来られるんですが、実のところお教えできないんです。毎年やるのが変わりますし、私の方法でやってみても土壌が変わると通用しないからです。答えはないんですよ」と。

辻さんのお茶を最高級品にしている要素は数多くあるが、まずはすべての新芽を手で摘みている点だ。手摘みは機械刈りと比べて効率は悪い。しかし、辻さんが手摘みにこだわるのには理由がある。機械で刈ると切断面が刃物で切ったように広がり、酸化が激しくなる。手摘みだと丁寧に摘むため断面積は少なく、その分酸化を促進しない。抗酸化力が高いといわれる緑茶は、酸化を止めてこそ緑茶。だからあくまで手摘みにこだわる。もう一つの理由は、含有栄養分だ。機械で刈ると新芽以外の葉の部分も収穫時に混じってしまうが、手摘みであれば一切新芽以外の物を混じらせない。すると茶葉になったとき、純粋な栄養分の濃度が保たれるのだ。

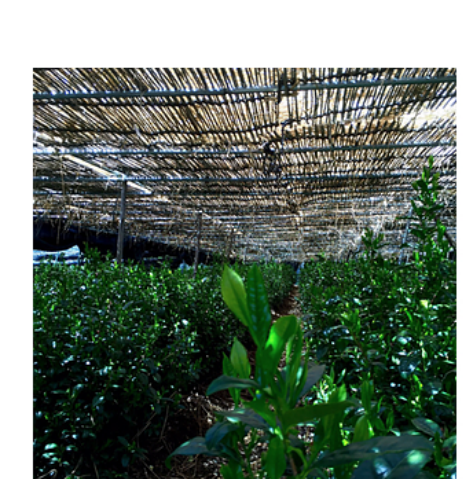


さらに、辻さんの農園では主に菜種油の有機肥料をタイミングよく使う。菜種油は土に接すると酸性度を上げ、アンモニアを大量に発生させる。お茶はアンモニアを吸収するとおいしくなる。このメカニズムはここ10年できつと解明されたのだが、実は100年以上前から宇治茶の肥料はいつも菜種油だった。「お茶は『畑のフォアグラ』といえるでしょう。肥料を与えれば与えるほど吸収するんです。どんどん食べさせては胃腸を飲ませるといふ連続です。木としては耐えがたい苦痛ですが、それがうま味に変わります。肥料を吸収は吸うほどお茶の味はよくなるです」と辻さんは言う。まろやかなお茶を作るためには、渋みの成分であるカテキンを抑制する必要がある。カテキンは、お茶の中にあるアミノ酸が日光に当たると発生する。「宇治茶は雑味や渋みがないまろやかな味が特徴ですから、どんどん菜種油を肥料として与え、遮光して栽培します」と。

宇治のお茶農家では遮光は通常80%程度だ。しかし、辻さんの農園では、他の農家の2倍の肥料を与え、95%の遮光を行う。遮光は味や栄養分の濃度を高めるための育成抑制でもあるので、おのずと収穫量は減る。だから収穫量は、一般的なお茶農家の6割くらいにまで減る。この「多肥高遮光」という方法は「究極のお茶」を作るための辻さん独自の方法なのだが、一つ間違えると大損害をもたらしてしまう。



探求心と野心に満ちた就農3年目の当時、辻さんはいよいよお茶を作りたくて多肥高遮光をぎりぎりまで試してみた。ところが、限界を超えてしまい、10aすべての木を枯らしてしまっ。新芽は幸いにも収穫できたが、おおもとの木をすべて枯らしてしまっのだ。お茶は木を植えてから5年目できつと新芽が取れる。5年間その10aからは何も収穫できなかった。



「しかし、枯らしてしまったおかげで限界が分かったんです。若いころにこの痛い経験もさせてもらったことがとてもよかったんです」と辻さんは言う。木がフォアグラみたいに栄養を詰め込まれて疲れて、生き残れるぎりぎりのところまで追いつめて、「もう枯れる」という直前に摘んだ新芽が究極の碾茶となる。それが今年日本一になった作品だった。

宇治川という大きな河川が近くに流れていることも最高のお茶づくりの理に通っている。収穫は5月なので、収穫前の春先の霜害が一番危険だ。しかし、宇治川があることで気流が発生し霜が降りない自然の仕組みになっているのだ。川に助けられて霜を避けることができる。宇治の自然条件はお茶づくりに最適で、この土地をお茶作りに選んだ先祖は、データなど一切なくとも「ここだ！」というのを知っていた。その先人の知恵に辻さんは深い尊敬と感謝の念を抱いている。

農作物において土壌は気象と同じくらい重要だ。高級なお茶づくりにおいて不可欠なのは強酸性の土壌と水はけなのだ。同じ宇治の中でも一定の範囲だけが土壌の作用によって特別な味のお茶を生み出す。まるでワインのようだ。ブルゴーニュ中でピノ・ノワールは生産され醸造されているけれど、ロマネー・コンティの畑だけが何十倍（何百倍？）もの値段がつくのと同じだ。畑の一角だけはい、土壌に含まれるミネラルや水はけがブルゴーニュの他の畑と違っているらしい。辻さんの農園に、ロマネー・コンティに相当する特別の一角がある。土壌に含まれている要素がほかの土地とは異なっており、そこから収穫されたお茶は、究極の中でも究極なのだそう。

その畑を案内してもらった時、「同じお茶の木の色が朝と夕方では違うのをご存知ですか？」と辻さんは尋ねた。私は知るはずもない。「お茶作りは自然との対話でもあるので、整地設計はできないんです。朝の色で肥料が効いたかどうかわかります。夕方で、管理がこれでいいのかどうかを見極めます」と辻さんは言う。



毎日朝夕、葉っぱの色をチェックし、365日間おいしいお茶をどう作るかとひたすら考えているという。この没頭と献身が日々お茶を前へ押し出している。宇治というお茶作りの条件が揃った土地でお茶農家に生まれ、小さいころからお茶に親しんできた。子供のことからお茶職人になると決めていた辻さん。

「お茶作りは私の天職だと思っています。国内だけでなく海外でも本物がわかる方に私のお茶が認められた時は本当にうれしいです。消費者の方々がおいしいと言ってくれるお茶を作ること、それが私の使命だと思っています」と言う。

現在、日本では農業を子供に継がせたくないという親世代は多く、それゆえ日本の農業は、超高齢化と後継者不足で衰退の一途をたどっている。辻さんは、「親が農業の面白さを子供に伝えれば、後継者は成り立ちます。こうすればビジネスになるということをお茶が率先して子供に伝えれば、農家は育ちます」と信じている。

茶葉の摘採期は1年に1回、5月だけ。この1か月のために辻さんは毎年熱い11か月を費やしている。



Methods unchanged for generations

Uji-cha green tea is one of the most highly-regarded types of Japanese tea. Among this prestigious range, the blends grown by Kiyoharu Tsuji are known to stand head and shoulders above the rest. While only a small proportion of tea marketed as Uji-cha is actually produced in the Uji region, Kiyoharu's tea plantation is located in Uji-Shi-nakano, an area in the south of Kyoto where quality tea has been grown for hundreds of years. What's more, Tsuji adheres strictly to the traditional method of harvesting only the first crop of the year, and then only picking the tea leaves by hand.

Hand-picked tea is actually a rarity, with more 0.05% of green tea on the Japanese market being picked in this way. Tsuji maintains a traditional method which has been maintained by a select group of Uji tea producers for 300 years. His accolades attest to the superiority of his product; he is an eight-time recipient of the Special Prize from the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the highest prize at the National Tea Fair.

So why does Uji-cha still have such a long history of tea production, and why has the area continued to produce such high-quality tea? EnjoY Kyoto visited the tea plantation to find out from the master tea grower himself. And what are the secrets of growing premium tea? According to Tsuji, it's all in the perfect amount of indulgence and deprivation.

Controlling the light

Sarvicing the tea leaves of sunlight during growth causes them to expand their surface area to try and gain more photosynthesis. This extra effort on the part of the plant results in fine, vivid green tea leaves. Exposure to direct sunlight promotes the breakdown of theanine (the sweet component in tea), which in turn becomes astringent catechins. In contrast, blocking sunlight prevents this phenomenon, and has the added benefit of adding umami depth to the tea leaf. Understanding this mechanism is the key to growing tea with a delicious, balanced taste.

"Shading is part of the traditional method of cultivation. When buds start to appear, we cover the bushes with woven mesh-like plant cover called yoshiki. This is the first covering. When the shoots reach a certain size, we place an extra layer of mesh-like plant cover over the screens. This straw is rather thick and blocks the sunlight well, so it works better than any other kind. This is just one example of the wisdom passed down from our predecessors."

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Kiyoharu Tsuji's ultimate tea

Kiyoharu Tsuji is the fifth generation tea grower at Tsuji, an Uji tea concern which was founded in 1900. He began his career in tea cultivation in 1969 at the tender age of 20. Tsuji initially trained with a tea wholesaler after finishing high school. As he familiarized himself with a wide variety of green teas, Tsuji began to think more deeply about the tea his father was producing. This is when he first thought about trying his hand at growing tea himself. It was time to get into the tea fields. He looked on the doors of famous tea plantations and asked questions. He received a simple answer: "Start by learning in the fields."

Taking this advice, Kiyoharu began his journey as a grower by planting some tea seedlings in an empty plot of land happily provided by his father in the heart of a premium tea-growing area. Tea plants take four years to reach maturity, so there was no immediate payoff. But it was a first step in his quest to grow the ultimate tea. Uninterested in profit and with his focus on winning an award, Tsuji tended his plants with utmost care, fertilizing them carefully and paying careful attention to shading. Four years later his first crop was harvested, and his tea was extraordinary. The quality of the tea was outside



Awash in nutrients

Another of the distinctive features of Uji-cha production is the copious use of fertilizer. By exposing the tea plants to plentiful amounts of nutrients, their leaves grow rich and fat beyond their normal size. This excess has the result of increasing the leaves' umami component, giving the tea a satisfying richness.

Depriving the plants by restricting their access to sunlight, while stuffing them full of fertilizer. It's an odd mix of restraint and indulgence which might be compared with the production of another delicacy, foie gras, in which geese are deprived of sunlight and are deliberately overfed to produce liver pate.

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Please note: Tsujiki tea fields are closed to visitors during the peak picking season in May and June. Requests for tours should be made in advance via email.
*Bookings for tea picking experiences are well being accepted at present.

ary. At the National Tea Fair, Tsuji's tea fetched a remarkable price of 500,000 yen per kilo. But then the unthinkable happened. Every one of the tea acres of tea bushes he'd spent four laborious years growing died. After a single crop he was left with no choice but to start over spending another four years growing plants.

"It was a result of over-feeding with nutrients and excessively thick shading. It was so it when making fine grass, if you overdid it and the bird died before the fine grass was produced." It was a pointless endeavor if the tea field was going to die. And a single crop does not make a profit. However, Tsuji was optimistic.

"But as a result, I was able to ascertain the tipping point that would kill the trees. If I could reduce nutrients to just under the tipping point, I could make the ultimate tea. I realized this only because I'd overdone it and killed the trees. I'd had this enormous failure that nobody else had," reflects Tsuji with a laugh.

Handing the trowel to the next generation

In the same way that he received a tea field from his father, Kiyoharu this spring gave his son a field of his own to plant. After completing his studies Tsuji's son initially worked at a bank, but realized his heart lay in more agricultural pursuits. He chose of his own accord to take over