

# Tea and serenity

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The breeze is strong in Long Beach on a recent Friday afternoon, particularly near the water, where it whips the tall slender palm trees back and forth and gives the waves a frothy white edge. A man walking his dog leans into the wind, and his canine companion's floppy ears seem about to blow off in a strong gust.

But in J. Cummins Keck's home, all is serene. Japanese music tinkles softly in the living room as Keck and two friends - Carolyn Bixby and Jeff Gido - get ready to partake in their favorite afternoon ritual - chanoyu, or the Japanese tea ceremony.

Keck, a Long Beach native, has been a fan of all things Japanese since childhood. He collects tea accessories, and has a staggering array of bowls, ladles, tea caddies and whisks. He has also turned a spare bedroom into a Japanese tea room - a 9-by-9-foot space with tatami (woven straw mats) and sliding shoji (paper doors) - perfect for intimate gatherings.

Keck and company are about to head into the tea room, but before they do, they stop to check their kimonos, adjusting the sashes and making sure they have the papers (kaishi) and a utensil that looks a lot like a miniature letter opener. Both are used to eat the sweet treats that accompany the tea. Each participant also gets a small fan.

Keck has had some problems with his feet recently, which means

he cannot technically host the ceremony, which is customarily carried out in seiza (kneeling, then resting back on your heels) position.

As a matter of fact, Keck and his companions say, longtime tea hosts often develop knee and ankle problems from a lifetime of seiza. The most elaborate tea ceremony can last four hours, all spent in seiza, and older hosts switch to serving from small tables and stools.

Keck's friend Cha Tomodachi offers to assist. Both Keck and Tomodachi have studied chanoyu (which literally means "hot water for tea") for years. Considering there are about 100 ways to perform the ceremony, that can mean a lifetime of study. Keck has already put in 12 years.

Today's ceremony is of the simpler variety, featuring "thin" tea (usucha). That is a literal translation, since "thin" tea is made with a smaller ratio of powdered green tea (or matcha) to hot water. Thick tea, or koicha, is almost paste-like, and, as Keck wryly puts it, is an "acquired taste."

Usucha calls for a ceremony lasting 30 to 40 minutes depending on party size, though a host typically entertains three people personally, with servants taking care of the rest, whereas koicha takes about an hour and a half. The most elaborate ceremony, which includes a banquet, called a kaiseki, takes about four hours.

A kaiseki is not in the plans today, but Keck and his companions quickly demonstrate that even the simplest ceremony doesn't skimp on ritual.

Keck leads the way to his tea room and stops at the closed shoji. He opens them from the right, revealing a small, dimly lit space. There is a window on the left of the far wall, and the afternoon light filters through the opaque panes. A few feet to the right hangs

a scroll. Its flowing characters indicate it is spring (scrolls, as well as kimonos and tea accessories change depending on season, some even month to month). Carefully but gracefully, Keck sinks into seiza on the threshold. He bows and murmurs something in Japanese. He gets up, shuffles (a shuffling gait is considered more regal) toward the scroll, and sinks into seiza again. He bows and pays tribute to the scroll.

Keck takes his seat at the right side of the room, near the scroll. His guests repeat what has just taken place. Then, it is Tomodachi's turn. She opens the left side of the shoji. She kneels at the entrance, then gets up and presents a laquered tray of sweets (rice dough dumplings with a sweet red bean filling). The tray winds up near the two guests. A teapot already waits on a stand in the corner.

She returns to the entrance, and after announcing in Japanese that she will make tea, begins one of several trips - the first for the cold water container, the second for the tea bowl (chawan), the tea caddy (natsume), scoop (chashaku) and the whisk (chasen), the third for the ladle (hishaku), ladle stand and wastewater container (kensui).

Once everything is in place, she takes a small silk scarf out of a fold in her kimono. It is bright red, and called a fukusa. (Female hosts can have fukusas of various colors; male hosts may only use purple.) She wipes each implement carefully - a symbolic purification. Each movement is delicate and orderly, as choreographed as a dance performed for years.

As she works, one gets the feeling of tradition and antiquity, which is not surprising, considering the Japanese tea ceremony dates back some 500 years.

It was the Chinese who first discovered the pleasures of tea almost 5,000 years ago. It wasn't brought to Japan, however, until much

later, about the seventh century A.D., and was introduced by Buddhist monks who used it as part of their ceremonies. Powdered tea, or matcha, was introduced at least four centuries later, and the modern tea ceremony was first codified in the 16th century by a man named Sen Rikyu, who is acknowledged as being one of the most influential figures in chanoyu history. Sadly, Rikyu got on the wrong side of a powerful ruler named Toyotomi Hideoshi, and was ordered to commit suicide in 1591. Rikyu's heirs, however, were luckier, and they took his teachings to help found the three main schools of tea ceremony in Japan - Urasenke, Omotesenke and Mushanokojisenke. These schools continue to influence the tea ceremony in Japan to this day, and their "tea masters" go back for generations.

One does not have to be a tea master, however, to appreciate the delicate movements of chanoyu. Once Tomodachi has finished the purifications (more elaborate ceremonies can stretch purifications to last much longer), she begins to make tea. The bowl is filled with hot water from the teapot, emptied, then tea is added, fresh water added, then the whisking begins.

The result is a frothy, loamy, bright green liquid that looks primordial. The brown earthenware bowl (since it is spring, it is a fairly thin bowl; summer bowls are the thinnest and most shallow, winter bowls thick and deep, all to help cool or heat tea, as needed) intensifies this impression.

Tomodachi turns the bowl twice, until the peony painted on the side faces Keck, then passes him the bowl. While she has been making tea, he has not been idle. Though conversation is not encouraged during chanoyu (it is a contemplative matter), Keck has eaten a sweet from the lacquer tray, carefully cutting it into pieces first. The lingering sweetness helps flavor the tea when he drinks it later.

Keck picks up the bowl, thanks Tomodachi, and murmurs an apology to the second guest for going first. He turns the bowl twice, so the peony now faces Tomodachi, and drinks. Well, he slurps, actually, which is completely acceptable, even encouraged, as it cools and oxygenates the tea.

Once the tea is gone, Keck puts down the bowl. Now it is the second guest's turn.

Once everyone has eaten and drunk, Tomodachi cleans up, once again giving the impression of doing a kneeling dance.

But the ceremony is just half over. Now comes the truly contemplative part. Guests are encouraged to inspect the tea caddy and the scoop. All these things have been chosen carefully by the tea maker to please the guests, and appreciation is necessary.

When it is really over, the ceremony has clocked in at about 30 minutes. And yet, even with all its elements, all its intricate movement, there is a simplicity about the pleasures of this ritual.

"The essence (of chanoyu) is sharing a bowl of tea," says Keck, once everyone is back in the living room, where the music still plays, and the light has shifted to the west. "One moment, one experience. One moment, one gathering."

And even back out on the street, with the strong ocean breeze whipping your hair into your face and your notebook pages flapping, the serenity of chanoyu remains.