



*Tea ceremony & Firework in Japan*

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### *My first Japanese tea ceremony experience*

Japan is known all over the world for their culture, especially the tea ceremony. Visitors from all over the world would like to experience this as the tea ceremony preparation and presentation of matcha is one of a kind. Being my 4th time in Japan, I have been to Kyoto but never got the chance to experience a Japanese tea ceremony. Who would ever have thought that you would be able to experience such ceremony in the rural town of Omagari, a place known for their fireworks. We were warmly welcomed to a huge household and were mesmerised by the history behind it. Apparently the house owner's family had decades of business in the shipping industry. To our disbelief, back then before the train existence, people in this village used to transport through the River by their house. Furthermore, this property of theirs have been preserved for many years even the antique items from Meiji period. I couldn't help myself from taking photos of their cosy traditional Japanese home as it looked exactly like it was from the olden days.

## *Chakai - Tea gathering -*

This was a more informal ceremony and so it's called a Chakai ( Tea gathering ). We were surely expecting nothing but only matcha but apparently, the Japanese way for relatively simple course of hospitality includes desserts, delicacies and of course more of other kinds of tea. It started with us being served a tray of various delicacies. What excites me was not the food. Instead, these ladies in kimonos, walking gracefully into our room in small steps and slowly placing the meal in front of us and ended with a sentence " Enjoy your meal" , and a bow. They were the most elegant waitresses I ever seen in my life. No words can describe how honoured I felt from the start of this ceremony. And so, it was time to indulge in these delicacies and it was red bean soup, pickles and preserved persimmon cubes garnished in cold shredded radish and carrots. The tray presentation was beautiful.





*Everything was like an art performance with the same posture*

Then after finishing our desserts, there came the lady whom would perform the tea ceremony. She have learnt the tea ceremony from Kyoto and according to the host, procedures vary from school to school, and with the time of year, time of day, venue, and other considerations. Since we came in the autumn, our desserts were based on that season as well. Her entrance started with a bow before entering. We all bow in return to show our respect as well. And next, for a few minutes, everyone was silent and watching her picking the bamboo ladle and scooping hot water from the Iron pot rested on the “ro”. From the folding handkerchief to cleaning the ladle, everything was like an art performance with the same posture. I just couldn't believe how were they able to make the task of cleaning look so elegant. And after the cleaning of her tools, she then started picking up the green tea powder, gracefully scooping it into her bowl. She then whisks it in a fast pace but still look calm and professional while doing it.

## ***Wagashi(Japanese small sweet) & Matcha drink***

Meanwhile, the other lady starts serving us some small sweet (*wagashi*) eaten from special paper called *kaishi*. As she finished with the 1st matcha ceremony, we were then served by the others our matcha drink. And I watched how gracefully as she pick her orange handkerchief, folds in a nice shape and gently cleans her ladle. Then, comes my matcha. The bowl was as big as the size of my palm. It looks like a whipped creamy drink but when I tasted it, it had a foamy top texture and a bitter taste in the end. It totally taste different from the matcha latte from Starbucks. However, the taste of it resemble to tea but not quite the same. It is sure something I would love to have again as I love the foamy light texture. Well, in contrast, the sweets were extremely sweet and so, I do recommend eating them after drinking instead of before. Then, you won't think that the matcha taste super bitter. As we were sitting and talking, the host were talking about the history of calligraphy painting on their wall. By the painting, is a pot of flower arrangement. It is known that these two decorations are very important during a tea ceremony. Lastly, we were served Houjicha which is the roasted tea.





### *Genuine and sincere*

The ceremony ended with our tea master's sleek and short performance waving her hands after cleaning the tools. She explained that this art movement is abstract in her own way to show how the autumn leaves gently blown away. She then bows at the door and we all bow as well. We were escorted out and then have a photo session by their house entrance. It was such an honourable experience to experience such ceremony. It was quite different from the tea ceremony I had seen from the TV programs before. What I felt during this ceremony was more to a personal level. We all agreed that it felt homely, welcoming and not like some other tea ceremony performance played like a role to entertain guests. It was genuine and sincere. I must say, I'm proud to have experience this ceremony in Omagari instead of Kyoto.

## *Adorable moment*

As we left the house, there came a bunch of adorable toddlers in a huge pram pushed by their teachers. It was such an adorable moment I just couldn't resist sharing this picture. And next, our lunch in Omagari was one of the best Japanese western fusion meal I ever tasted in my life. Christian ordered the fried chicken with the Udon set that comes together with soft drink, ice cream and dessert later. While I ordered this Poached egg Udon cabonara with Mexican thin slice pizza and creme brulee , ice cream as a dessert. I totally recommend this meal! Don't you feel hungry even looking at this? Well, after such a scrumptious lunch, we then headed next with lots of excitement as we were going to make Imitated Fireworks( Hanabi).





## ***Making imitated Hanabi***

Visiting a firework/hanabi factory was sure Unique enough but we sure got more excited in the process of learning how to make our own Firework which is known as Hanabi in Japanese. So here's the recipe! And we have totally no idea what are they. It all started with the manager explaining the types of fireworks and he informed us that we would be making the basic firework called Peony. He also explained about what other kinds of Fireworks they have and how the inner core looks like. And here this diagram is sort of what we will be doing for the day. We were given tapes, fake gunpowder, chemical balls, tracing paper, some readymade hemisphere thick cardboards strings and a small short black straw. The first step was to place coloured balls into the round cup and then placing the tracing paper over it overlapping a smaller cup to set the shape of the paper. Then we remove the cup and place in the fake gunpowder. It then leads to us repeating the same step for the other side. Well, the tricky part comes after as we were required to quickly combine the two hemispheres into a ball without spilling the inner fillings. I sure did quite well for that. It sure pulls off as the look of a bomb with the string placed into the straw.



## *Professionals would emphasize more on the size*

However, we were told not to place the string in the straw instead, tying it as a loop and then stick all over the ball with rice glued sticky paper. The smell of strong rice wine purge into my nose in this crafting regime. Well such activity was sure fun mainly due to our entertaining teacher as well as our group commenting on each other's artwork beauty. Apparently, my sticking skills were terrible compared to teacher as his piece on the right has no bumps at all ! Then after, we had a questionnaire session and I was curious on how does the other kinds of custom made name fireworks or odd shapes were made. The manager then explained on the way of arrangement in the ball would determine the shape of it. However, a 2D design might vary as it will only be seen as the firework image desired at a certain angle. As such, professionals would emphasize more on the size and various colour transitions in a firework.





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### ***Why “imitated” ?***

At that point, I did not understand fully on what that meant. Then later, after going through the factory tour; I came to realisation as he informed me the drying process of just the chemical balls would take up to 1-2weeks. And that is the process whereby they build up the different layers of colours in the chemical balls determining the colour transitions of a firework. And here is our team after a fun learning process of making our own imitated Hanabi, Why imitated? So, it can be taken with us back to our own country as a souvenir! We even have a sticker placed on it to state that it's a toy gimmick so we would stay out of trouble when checking in our luggages in the airport. As for the experience, it was sure worth it. Such opportunity to visit a firework factory and even making one on our own was surely an honour. These are the things in life we weren't taught in school and even the internet won't be able to replace the actual hands-on experience. What's more rewarding is that after, we got the privilege to view the beautiful fireworks.

## Omagari Fireworks Festival, one of the most renowned fireworks festivals

Japan is widely known for their amazing fireworks yearly especially during summer. However, what if you missed their summer firework festival then? Fear not as there are still opportunities for you to experience way more than just seeing the fireworks here in OMAGARI, JAPAN. Amongst these festivals, Omagari no Hanabi, the Omagari Fireworks Festival, which takes place in Omagari, Akita, is one of the most renowned fireworks festivals in Japan, and has almost 800,000 visitors in a single night. Omagari no Hanabi has a long-running tradition. It started in the year 43 of the Meiji Era, 1910, and has been held annually on the fourth Saturday of August. Every year, pyrotechnicians all across Japan compete against one another with their vivid fireworks to determine who the best is. This town is mainly of rice field plantations and have a few kinds of firework factories around. As we enter the premises of the factory, we were surprised to not see a huge factory building. Instead, it looked like a small village in their premises where buildings were separated and apart from each other. Here, as you can see is the map and the manager of the factory explains in detail on why they are built such way.





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### *In the factory*

Plus, they also have a shrine built at the entrance to have spiritual protection over their premises. What I do realized is also that every corner, there will be signs stating on beware of explosion or fire and some extinguishers for fire prevention. Plus, they have extra walls built for safety precaution in case of an explosion or fire. In the first procedure, we witness an employee of theirs in safety mask while sifting the gun fire powder to make sure there are no other particles mixing in it. This is the most important step as any foreign particle might cause a faulty work of art. Again, we were quite surprised that they do not have much employee and at such it gives us the sense of how the Japanese work in precision and quality. Then next, is the process where they will produce the chemical balls that would determine the colours of the fireworks. In this process, we were brought into a room where they had two employees working on mixing the sifted powder with a liquid chemical mixture into a paste. Next, they will place it into the huge turbine machine. The metal turbine machine works as a tool to give the round shape of the chemical balls within several minutes. However, this process would take some time as it requires a lot of patience in slowly increasing the ball shape size.

## *Dry the chemical balls*

We were then brought to the next room which is called the dryer room. In this room, they will then place the chemical balls to dry. Well, I asked the manager: "How long will it take these balls to dry?" His reply surprised me as it would take a week or two! And then, he explains if they would need to dry several times and going through the same turbine procedures especially for those fireworks with various colour transitions. He then showed us a real look on a half sliced chemical ball on what he meant by the colours. Based on these different levels of layers, it determines the various colour transitions in a firework. Then, he also brought us out and showed us where they would dry the chemical balls in Summer.



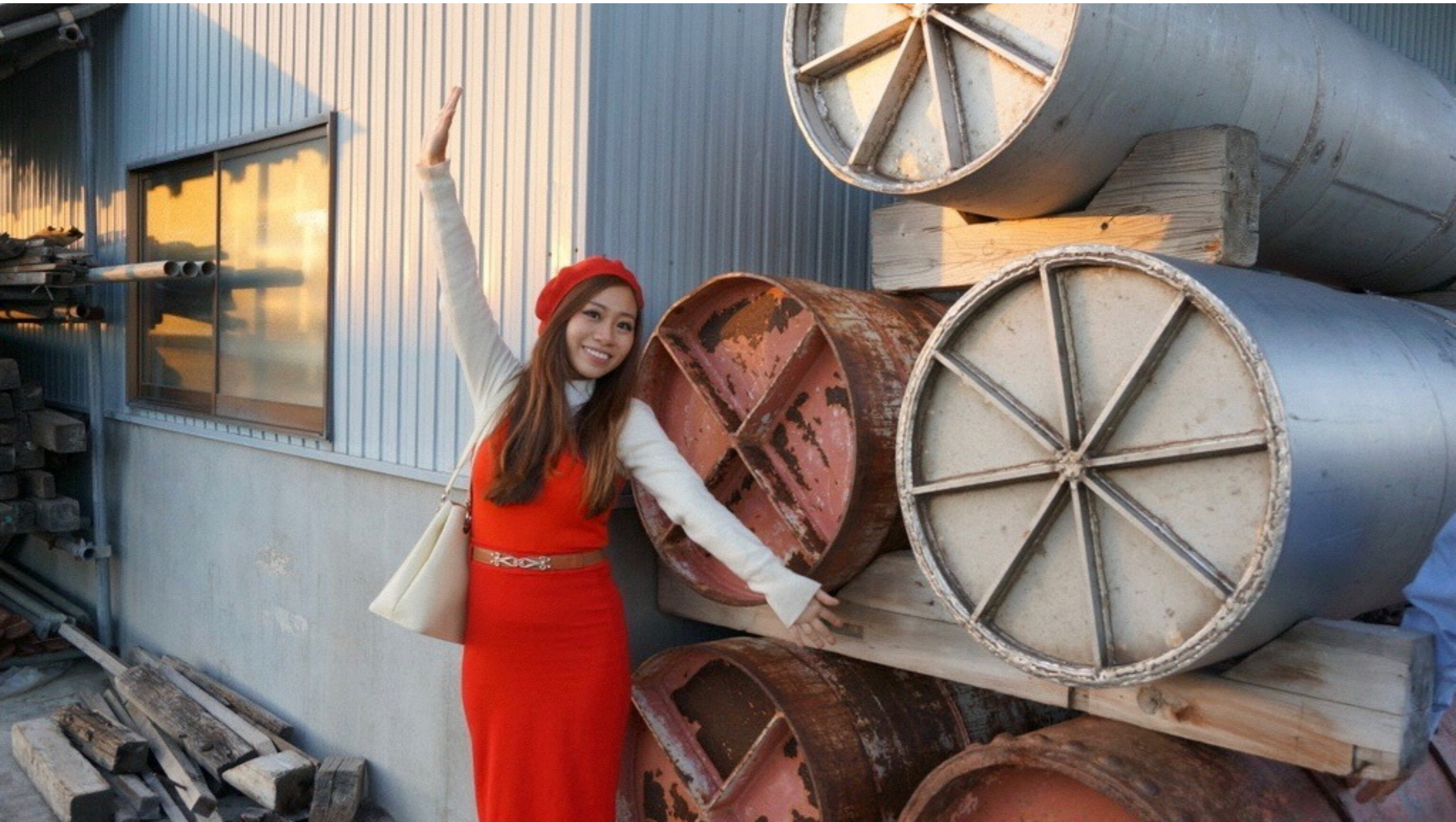


### *Professional works*

As we entered another building section, we were brought to a row of 3 rooms and the first room looked like this. What came up in my mind was that it looks like an art craft room but the fact that this is a hazardous professional job where employees risk their life to create beautiful fireworks. The first room were two employees working on a bigger size of firework arrangement. These arrangements are very vital as it determines the design and shape of how the firework would appear like. The precision and concentration on their task were intense. We also had the opportunity to hands on carry one of those to see how heavy it can be and indeed it was Heavy! Then the next room was almost a similar task but of different size. And the last room we came to a team of employees that were making tiny balls arrangements. To me, it seems like this would be the most complicated among all as you would really need good eyesight to arrange tiny balls and at the same time being able to produce more amount of it. We were then brought to the last building which was the furthest and there we found more female employees instead. Well, this room was filled with much more chatters and with a strong smell of rice wine.

## *The work behind the short seconds of firework beauty*

Apparently, they weren't drinking sake but using rice glue. The smell of rice glue is so strong that it reminds me so much of sake. The manager explains that rice glue contains no excessive chemicals which would not affect the reaction of the fireworks. And out of curiosity, I asked the manager : "So, how Big is the Biggest firework your factory has ever made? " He told us it was the 3rd biggest one but the firework is not around yet, the pipe for the firework insertion is still kept in the storage and we were able to witness it with our own eyes. It's about 5 times the size of my head or maybe more. Well, as for the normal size fireworks, this is how the size of their pipes looks like. Here, I'm able to insert my own made imitation Firework. Here to read more about my experience in Making imitated Fireworks(Hanabi). Honestly, before coming to this firework factory, I used to think fireworks were chemical particles stuffed in a pipe. Thanks to this factory tour, I definitely now know much more about the process of firework making and appreciate the work behind the short seconds of firework beauty.





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### *Like an art piece*

As the sunset, we got ourselves ready, put on more layers of coats and waited till it gets cold and dark. And our hearts were filled with joy and excitement in a colder environment. As we all silently wait and get out cameras and phone ready. Everyone stood calm and need not to worry for a good spot as there were lots of space for our little group. And there it came: Puffff !! And all we hear is the sound of clicking cameras and firework explosion. As I wouldn't want to miss any moment of this beautiful artpiece. Time sure pass fast, and one by one it went by as the CEO explains the type of firework being released. For example: the 2 colours Peony firework or the combination fireworks. And then just within a blink of an eye, it was finished. Such fireworks were the Best ever I had seen in my life. It was way much different than the ones we've seen back in Malaysia. The typical one coloured firework with random aims. It seems like the fireworks were choreographed in height and directions when firing during a combination. They were like an art piece, explained and demonstrated. It was surely different from a normal celebration or festival kind. This short firework presentation in Omagari was impressively simple and personal. To me, it felt like a wedding proposal. It was beautiful and I was sure glad to be able to witness it with my other half.