

## ACT Report Notebook

We present reports on a variety of programs—visual art, music, theater, traditional culture, local art projects, symposia and more—organized in areas around Tokyo by Arts Council Tokyo.

### Enjoying tea, rediscovering culture in autumnal Tokyo: Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony 2023 (October 22, Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum)

Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony is an autumn tradition in Tokyo. As an event allowing visitors to enjoy the tea ceremony, it is one of Tokyo's largest in terms of venue size, the number of participating tea schools, and the number of visitors.

Held for the 14th time in 2023, the event's venues Hama-rikyu Gardens (October 14/15) and Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum (October 21/22) buzzed with visitors.

Following last year's hugely successful post-pandemic revival of the event, same-day ticket sales were back this year for the first time in four years. It provided an opportunity for different schools of tea to come together and for anyone, regardless of their tea ceremony experience, to feel free to take part: visitors included families with small children, not just people familiar with the tea ceremony.



Venue entrance

Visiting the Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony 2023 program held at Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum were Japan residents, Thomas Lachlan Burnell and Katherine Emily Mattison. It was the first experience of the tea ceremony for Thomas from Leeds in the UK, and for Katherine, a native of New York. The day they attended was blessed with typical Tokyo autumnal weather of clear blue skies and warm sunshine, and the weather was fine enough for short sleeves. We report from joining Thomas and Katherine, full of excitement and expectation about their first tea ceremony, at the Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony 2023.



Left: Katherine (from the US) Right: Thomas (from the UK)

### **Indoor Tea Ceremony in English/ Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family**

As the annex of Tokyo Metropolitan Edo-Tokyo Museum in the Ryogoku area, Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum opened in Koganei Park in Koganei City in 1993. Visitors can go look inside thirty buildings dating from the Edo period through the mid Showa period which were difficult to preserve at their original location and which have been relocated and reconstructed.

At first, the two visited the mid Edo period Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family to attend an indoor tea ceremony can be enjoyed with English instruction. Ten guests including Thomas and Katherine were invited into a spacious zashiki Japanese-style room. The host's commentary on the meaning of tea etiquette and how to use the tea utensils were translated into English by an interpreter.

Thomas and Katherine were both very interested in seeing the formalized tea ceremony gestures up close for the first time. Although a little uncertain and hesitant, they followed the English instruction and enjoyed the Japanese sweets “wagashi” and tea, gaining some surprising realizations and insights in the process.



Indoor Tea Ceremony in English/ Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family





The interpreter came to Japan from NewYork for this event.

**Thomas:** I was a little nervous because I didn't know whether it was okay to go ahead and drink or wait until everyone got their tea.

**Katherine:** Thomas and I did exchange looks. But it was the best matcha green tea I've ever had! The wagashi in the shape of autumn leaves were very autumnal and cute.

**Thomas:** The warming up of the tea bowl at the start is the same when you make tea in Britain. Prewarming the teacup is an essential step in brewing good black tea.

**Katherine:** You rotate the tea bowl before drinking the tea, right? I didn't get why until the instruction. It was a new concept for me, to show restraint and respect to host by avoiding drinking from the front of the bowl.



Thomas and Katherine observing the tea ceremony up close as main and second guests of host

There was a bit of an incident when Thomas tried to stand up after the 20-minute tea ceremony experience! He sat in the seiza formal kneeling position throughout, so his legs went numb, and he felt unsteady on his feet. "I was so into every process of tea ceremony I didn't notice!" he said. Katherine on the other hand seemed to adeptly try to change her posture and sit cross-legged during the session. Incidentally, in the pre-tea ceremony information, an announcement said it was fine for participants not used to sitting in the seiza



position to relax and sit cross-legged. Participants didn't have to worry as there were chairs to rent if anyone needed them at any seats in Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony.



“I was so into the tea ceremony I forgot all about my legs!” says Thomas

### Exploring favorite buildings

In between tea ceremony programs, Thomas and Katherine decided to enjoy a walk around the Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum grounds. Thomas, who mentioned he was interested in traditional Japanese architecture, had apparently visited the museum once before. “This is my favorite,” said Thomas, taking us to House of Kunio Maekawa, formerly the home of architect Kunio Maekawa, a key figure in modern Japanese architecture.

**Thomas:** I like the way the light comes in through the big windows. Compared to that, the doors and the other windows are teeny.

**Katherine:** It feels nice with the breeze blowing through the living room. I wish I could live in a house like this!



“There are also small windows that makes you want to take a peek,” says Thomas

Meanwhile, what caught Katherine's eye was an downtown area lined with shops and a public bath of early Showa period. At Yamatoya Store, a dismantled, relocated and restored grocery store, Katherine discovered a counter with an abacus and ledgers lying on it, as well as an American-made cash register modified to accept Japanese yen. She was fascinated to find out the changes over time, and the specifics for equipment that had crossed the ocean.



“The original keys were for dollars, but they’ve been customized to display yen!” says Katherine

**Katherine:** Even when I'm walking around the streets of Tokyo like I normally I do, I'm interested in the alleys and the streetscape. When I walk through these little corners of the city with small shops on each side, I like to imagine what life was like in the past, and how people lived.



“We can play shop,” jokes Katherine



## Machinaka Concert/ Kodakara-yu

At the end of this reconstructed street view stands the imposing sento public bathhouse Kodakara-yu, built in 1929. This was Thomas and Katherine's next stop. In addition to the tea ceremony, the Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony event actually includes a program of performances. A concert entitled "Machinaka Concert Music Program TOKYO" was held at Kodakara-yu, organized by Tokyo Bunka Kaikan.



Machinaka Concert/ Kodakara-yu

The two of them attended the trumpet quartet concert. The trumpet players made their appearance, the audience - crammed into a space between the men's bath and the changing rooms - eagerly awaiting their performance. The quartet gave a jaunty and flamboyant concert.



The full house concert was a great success

**Thomas:** It was weird but fun being able to listen to a medley of Christmas songs in a public bath. I've been to small concerts in old churches in the UK, but it's pretty unique to use a bathhouse as a concert venue.  
**Katherine:** It's fine for enjoying a concert, but I was a bit surprised being a bathhouse how many windows it had. It made me curious about how it was used back then. I liked all the old advertisements inside.





Katherine and Thomas enjoying the concert

### Nodate Outdoor Tea Ceremony/Gate of Date Family Residence

The two next headed to a “Nodate” outdoor tea ceremony. The nodate tea ceremony is generally considered to be a more casual affair than an indoor tea ceremony.

**Katherine:** The tea ceremony at the Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family was rather formal and I was nervous, but I learnt a lot by experiencing it with instructions that helped me learn about the procedure. I think it was perfect as a first experience. The atmosphere was like a secret meeting. Compared to that, I felt more chilled about joining the nodate tea ceremony, maybe because of the open outdoor feel to it.

**Thomas:** It was definitely relaxing and fun – maybe because we already had a bit of experience. At the Tsunashima Family house, I was seated as guest of honor, so I felt a bit nervous with everyone’s attention on me. What was nice about the nodate tea ceremony was being able to watch everyone from the back, so I could enjoy it in a more relaxed way.



Nodate Outdoor Tea Ceremony/Gate of Date Family Residence



After the nodate tea ceremony finished, there was an opportunity to ask simple questions to the sensei who served as host. What interested Katherine was the flowers hanging from the nodategasa red parasol. The sensei said she picked the flowers for that day from her own garden, and that in fall when there are fewer flowers, small wild flowers are gathered and hung, bouquet-style. This is apparently a thoughtful gesture by the host, who wants tea ceremony guests to feel as cheerful and relaxed as possible.



The host explaining something to Katherine and Thomas

**Thomas:** Come to think of it, the taste of the tea was completely different at the two tea ceremonies, wasn't it?

**Katherine:** The tea we had at the Tsunashima Family house tasted bitter and earthy. The tea we had at the Nodate tea ceremony seemed to be smoother and frothy, with a sweetness to it.

**Thomas:** Such a perfect review! I guess it varies depending on the school. Also your impression of the tea changes with the environment you drink it in.



Katherine and Thomas exchange notes on the difference in taste

Being able to attend different sorts of tea ceremony and enjoying comparing the different types of tea is another unique and fascinating aspect of the Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony.



## Thinking about each other's cultures from the perspective of omotenashi (Japanese hospitality)

The Japanese chakai tea gathering is an opportunity for human communication. There is an unparalleled luxury to the time spent enjoying tea and Japanese sweets, being captivated by the unique setting, and interacting with your fellow guests. Thomas says there are both similarities and differences between a British-style tea party and the Japanese chakai.

**Thomas:** I think British tea parties and Japanese chakai tea gatherings are similar experiences in terms of the host's hospitality towards the guests and enjoying interaction through tea. The biggest difference though is that the host themselves makes the tea at a Japanese tea ceremony, serves it to the guests, and tidies up afterwards in a whole chain of hospitable actions. The host also communicates their "message" if you like through the utensils used, the hanging scrolls on the walls, and the flowers in the room. In the UK, once you have laid out a tea set and gathered around the table, it is basically a question of helping yourself as you wish. The UK and Japan are similar in that people regulate water temperature so they can savor the aroma of the tea leaves and are selective about the tableware.

**Katherine:** Yes, even though we share the same culture of communication through tea, each country has its own points of difference.



Indoor Tea Ceremony in English/ Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family

## To experience culture is to follow the stories of the people who live in that country

What Thomas and Katherine have in common when they come into contact with Japanese culture is that they are more interested in the story behind the experience than the experience itself. For example, when they walked around the museum grounds looking at the old buildings, they imagined the history, traditions, customs, and other stories that once existed there, and appeared to take in things with a rich sensibility beyond what they could see with their eyes.

The two of them are now interested in learning things involving the use of their hands.





Indoor Tea Ceremony in English/ Farmhouse of the Tsunashima Family

**Katherine:** I'm interested in crafts. I'm taking basket-weaving and Edo-kiriko glasswork lessons. They're beautiful to look at, they make nice gifts, owning them makes you feel good, and you feel happier with nice things in your life. No matter what I do, I'm not satisfied with trying something once - I enjoy taking the time to make it my own thing. It would also be interesting to travel around local areas and see everyday life.

**Thomas:** I played guitar when I was a student, so I'd like to try learning the shamisen next. Like Katherine, I don't want to have a one-off trial lesson: I'd like to have regular lessons to get better and be able to play. I also want to learn Japanese cookery. I wish I could make things by reading Japanese recipe books.



**Katherine:** The event's title in English is "Grand Tea Ceremony" but it was less formal and more friendly and relaxed than the title suggests. It would be good to find a way to give a better idea of how easygoing and accessible it is.

**Thomas:** I think so too. What I was worried about personally before taking part in the event was not knowing the etiquette and ending up doing something rude. If anything, I think it would be reassuring if people could get that information beforehand.



Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony 2023 ended on a high note. It was not just a cultural experience, but a leisurely occasion of abundant and meaningful exchange and discovery. The tea ceremony was an opportunity for visitors to talk about what they felt, noticed, and realized; to develop new interests; and to experience the spaces and spirit of historical buildings. When you relax your shoulders and give yourself up to the spirit of omotenashi, your facial expressions naturally soften, and your body feels warm and comfortable. It was an event that added a touch of warmth and comfort to fall.

Tokyo Grand Tea Ceremony 2023

<https://www.artscouncil-tokyo.jp/ja/what-we-do/support/grants/regional-grant-program/57174/>

Schedule/venue: Saturday, October 14 and Sunday, October 15, 2023 (Hama-rikyu Gardens)

Saturday, October 21 and Sunday, October 22, 2023 (Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum)

Organizers: Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Arts Council Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture)

Event website : <https://www.artscouncil-tokyo.jp/en/events/60709/>

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Text by Mami Maeda

Writer and translator born in 1992. She reports and writes on theater, architecture, and traditional culture. After graduating from the Department of Architecture, University of Tokyo, she earned a Master's degree from University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies. Her research theme was "theater and community development." Since 2017, Maeda has worked as a city planning consultant. She joined in Arts Academy : Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre Training Course for Theater Professionals in 2021, specializing in theater production. Since 2022 she has been a writer for the Association for Corporate Support of the Arts.

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