

In an Austin Tea Room, the Japanese Way of Tea Is Taught Over Zoom

How Linda Mosley passes along centuries-old tradition during the pandemic

BY SHANE PFENDER, FRI., FEB. 5, 2021



Linda Mosley presenting Japanese Tea Ceremony at Umlauf Sculpture Garden, Family Day 2019, sponsored by JASGA (Japan-America Society of Greater Austin) (Photo by Kim Mosley)

As a rare dusting of snow covers the streets of Austin, a small group meets online for a centuries-old Japanese celebration. Hatsugama, also known as the opening of the first kettle, occurs every January during the coldest time of the year as a symbolic welcoming of the new season. Linda Mosley presides over the virtual ceremony, her tea room wall adorned with a young bud of a Japanese camellia flower to reflect these young days of the new year. Mosley's decade of study of Japanese tea is evident in the relaxed assurance with which she performs Shozumi, or laying down charcoal into the hearth where a kettle of water is heated. Her every movement feels like an invitation toward a deep sense of ease. This ease is enhanced by the calligraphic Japanese scroll hung behind her.

"Cherish harmony."

Following the Shozumi, her most advanced students follow up, performing two unique styles of tea preparation. They owe their skills to Mosley, who has instructed them in Chado (the way of tea) online since the beginning of the pandemic and in her own North Austin tea room in years past.

These days, she teaches seven students online. As a teacher of the ceremony as certified by the Urasenke Foundation, the organizational body that oversees the worldwide tradition of Chado, Mosley operates a small but growing school of tea

students here in Austin. She offers a range of tea lessons such as the four part Beginner Introduction Series. (Information can be found on her website at www.lmosley.com.)

Tea students and teachers alike have improvised their methods with the dawn of the pandemic. In this virtual Hatsugama, students make tea in their own improvised tatami rooms, while spouses and children dart by in the background. In the Japanese tea ceremony, nearly every movement is prescribed down to the placement of a fingertip, but in this year's celebration, any small mistakes are met with Linda's easy laugh and warm encouragement. The four tenets of tea ceremony feel alive in Mosley, whose presence and guidance seems to put each student into a place of ease: harmony (wa), respect (kei), purity (sei), and tranquility (jaku).

Whether it's in the form of a handwritten Japanese scroll hung on the tea room wall, her garden-plucked flower arrangements, or her own warmhearted tea service, these tenets remain the central focus of Mosley's instruction. Also present in the Zoom in a place of honor is Mosley's teacher, Dr. Sheila Fling, who has been teaching the ceremony for nearly three decades. With a keen eye and a reassuring smile, she observes her student's students.

The Hatsugama celebration traditionally involves a shared meal, during which students and teachers have a chance to relax and chat. For this year's virtual gathering, there is no meal and less conversation. In place of conversation are the sounds of the deep, relaxed breaths of the host as they prepare, the sound of their bamboo whisk tapping the sides of the bowl, and the low proclamation of Japanese phrases shared between one another.

"O-fuku kagenwa?"
How is the tea?
And in response:
"Taihen kekko de gozaimasu."
It is excellent.

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