

**A Matter of Tea**

By Charles T. Whipple

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The kamamoto knelt on the floor, his forehead pressed against the cool planking.

“I must have a special bowl, kamamoto,” Lady Fujimura said. Her fingers played with the collars of her 12-layered robe. “Come closer,” she commanded.

The kamamoto moved a dozen centimeters toward the lady, no more. She leaned at him, hissing. “Special, kamamoto, do you hear? Lady Murasaki is holding a tea tournament at the Golden Pavilion on the night of the new moon. We are to attend with our finest personal tea bowls and I must have one that surpasses all others. Make one such for me. Or forfeit your standing, your family, and your kiln.”

The kamamoto once again pressed his forehead to the floor. “As you wish, Lady Fujimura. A tea bowl, as no other.” He inched backward, keeping his face to the floor, until he crossed the jamb and the maid closed the fusuma to the lady's audience chamber.

Surely Lady Murasaki's tournament would assemble the finest tea bowls; works by the great Kakiemon, by Raku, by Shigaraki. The kamamoto groaned. His kiln had served the House of Fujimura for centuries but recent days had seen change in Heiankyo. The drink called tea, the green ambrosia Hosen had brought from the Middle Kingdom five decades ago, spread like fire on Mt. Hiei. No noble was without a lacquered tea carrier at his belt and fortunes were won and lost at tea tournaments where the upper crust displayed their tea bowls and vied at tasting new brews and identifying blends. Ah, such fools. The kamamoto groaned again. Such fools, and yet it was his heritage to serve the House of Fujimura. He must exceed himself and create a tea bowl exquisite above all.

For two months the kamamoto labored. A hundred tea bowls ate fire in his kiln, and a hundred were smashed to shards as inadequate; they were not the epitome demanded by Lady Fujimura.

Eyes sunken into fatigue-gouged sockets, the kamamoto sighed. He saw no alternative. His feet dragged as he made his way to the tiny *chashitsu* tea room and removed a key from its hiding place behind the hanging scroll. What else could he do? Lady Fujimura would have an extraordinary tea bowl, if it meant his life. His ancestors secreted the recipe for very special pottery, with an essence so powerful it seemed to sip at the very soul.

He unlocked the heavy padlock and shouldered open the ponderous door. Motes swam in the sunbeams coming through the high windows. No light touched the treasures stored behind those three-foot fireproof walls. The kamamoto extracted a dust-covered wooden box from a shelf far to the rear. Bearing the box with both hands, he closed the storeroom door with a hip. He spread a silken *fukusa* cloth on the stone step before setting down the box so he could relock the door. Certain the heavy lock was in place, the kamamoto once again cradled the dusty box with both hands as he returned to the room where he threw his works of clay.

The scroll he took from the box held dark secrets. It told how to mix clay to hold the spirit, and gave the recipe for glaze so pure and white that it hurt the eyes. And it was accompanied by a knife so ancient that its blade was of obsidian, sharp as shattered glass, bound with sinew to a blackened handle of bamboo.

The kamamoto gathered the ingredients. Fine clay. Powdered flint. Oxide of iron. Mangan. They made a hillock the size of a doubled fist on the kneading table. The kamamoto closed his eyes for a long moment. Then picked up a long flat bamboo *saji* and began to dry-mix the powders. He left only once, to change into a white linen habit and rough-woven flaxen apron, and to tie back his graying hair with a twist of virgin straw. The time had come to mix the clay.

The kamamoto cleansed the obsidian knife with sacred water, letting the cold liquid drip back into the basin until the blade was dry once more. Placing the razor of volcanic glass at his left index finger, he raked the blade across the balls of the fingers, slicing them to the bone. Taking the knife in his bloody left hand, he sliced his right hand. Then, blood pouring from the wounds, he began kneading the clay, using his own life's blood to soften the material and make it pliable. Only after he'd coiled clay into a tea bowl and smoothed it with his bleeding fingers did he wash his wounds and bind them.

The bowl dried purple as a scab, dimpled and uneven. Each day the kamamoto peered at the drying bowl, but never touched it. The day came for firing, and the kamamoto covered his hands with scarves of finest silk and carried the purple tea bowl to a small kiln standing in the corner of

the workroom. A single firebrick protruded from the inner wall of the kiln, shelf enough for just one tea bowl. There the kamamoto placed the purple bowl.

From piles of charcoal, the kamamoto chose carefully – bamboo for resilience, oak for perseverance, paulownia for stability, zelkova for finish – and filled the small kiln to its flue. He set the weights so gravity would keep the bellows moving, fanning the charcoal fire, then lit a pitch pine faggot from a candle flame. Once the faggot burned brightly, he inserted it into the hole he had prepared in the base of the charcoal. Forty-three hours later, the charcoal was ashes and the purple bowl was midnight black with tiny specks of white like stars in the firmament.

The kiln cooled. By morning, the kamamoto could remove the bowl. He held it in his damaged hands. The bowl seemed to reach beyond black. The specks of white summoned images of heaven's silver river. The kamamoto felt a pull on his spirit from within the bowl. With a sharp intake of breath, he placed the bisque bowl on a shelf and went to mix the glaze.

A measure of poison witherite, some tan bosuna to smooth the mixture, four measures of choseki syenite and another four of light *nen-do* clay. The kamamoto added crystal pure water from the spring at Yugawara until the powders were a well-mixed slurry.

From the shelf he brought the midnight-black bisque bowl, and, holding it by the foot, dipped the bowl three-fifths into the slurry. Turning it up, he replaced it to the shelf and let the slurry run as it would, while he filled the kiln once more, almost to the top, with charcoal. And layered in among the charcoal, pitch pine to add coloring to the glaze.

The glaze dried, but the kamamoto waited. From Mt. Hiei came the deep resonating sound of a temple bell. Eight times it rang. The hour of the rat. The kamamoto slid aside the shoji screen and peered at the sky. Directly overhead, a full moon swam in black the color of Lady Fujimura's bowl. *Namu amida butsu*, the kamamoto prayed. He shut the screen and used the obsidian knife to slice the tip from the little finger of his left hand. He let blood pool in the bowl, then swirled it up and around, lightly coloring the bone white glaze.

Placing the bowl on the protruding firebrick, the kamamoto fired the kiln once more.

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The messenger knelt in reverence. "For you, from the kamamoto," he said, extending a *furoshiki*-wrapped package.

"Place it on the *tatami*," Lady Fujimura said.

He did, and backed away.

She untied the silken *furoshiki*. A finely folded sheet of *washi* paper rested on a kiriwood box. She unfolded the paper. Two characters written in blood – *zet'cho* – the very best. In the corner of the paper, the kamamoto's official seal, pressed in vermillion.

Lady Fujimura hastened to remove the tea bowl from the kiriwood box. For an instant, it felt too hot to touch, then cold as an icy winter day. She held it in her left palm, turned it with her right hand, inspected the black body, the nearly transparent white glaze, the brownish streaks left by pitch-pine smoke, and inside, red – the color of fresh blood – across the bottom. Her breath caught. Awesome. Magnificent. Chilling.

“I . . . I . . . I will have tea,” she called. The messenger slipped away unnoticed. “I will have tea,” she repeated, and bore the bowl to the *chashitsu* tea ceremony room.

Lady Fujimura hardly noticed the ritual of preparing tea. The bowl held her attention. She hungered to drink from it. A smile played at her lips. Other hands reached for the bowl, measured powdered tea into it, swirled the tea with bamboo whisk – it foamed. Saliva arose in Lady Fujimura's dry mouth. She reached for the bowl.

With unseemly haste she turned the bowl until it faced the proper direction. She raised it to her lips, and the bowl took her soul. The bowl fell from her hand, bounced once on her thigh, and rolled across the *tatami* floor, leaving a trail of green tea behind.