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## DRIPPING WITH HISTORY

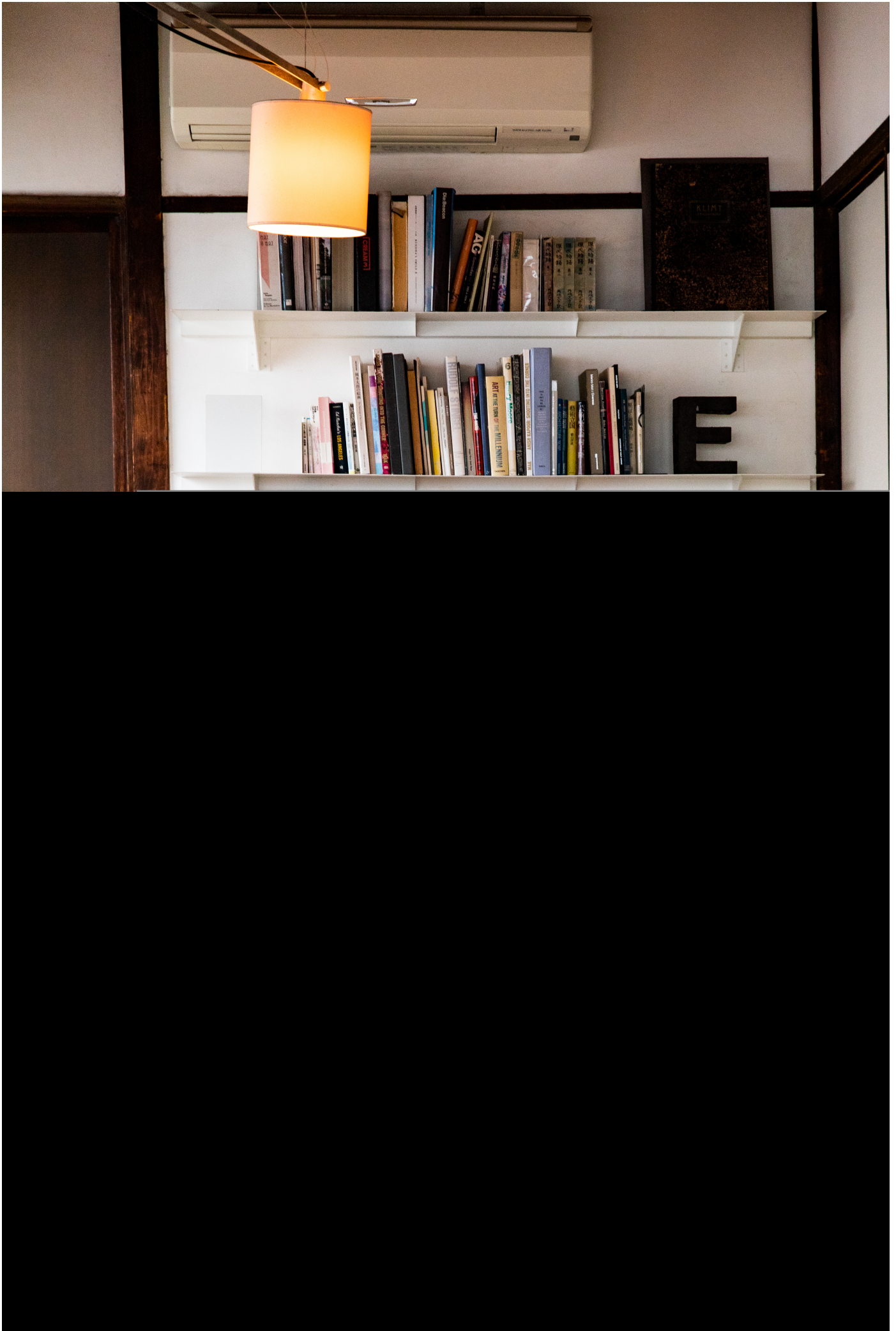
A renowned destination for third-wave coffee shops, Tokyo is rediscovering an older caffeine haven: its 19th-century kissaten. Jessica Kozuka enjoys a brew at the most intriguing ones



**Photos by** Andrew Faulk

At 2pm on a weekday, on the edge of Tokyo's trendy and historic Yanaka area, a line of fashionable young millennials waits patiently while taking photos of some canary-yellow signage. It would be easy to assume they're queuing for an Instagram-ready café, but you'd be wrong. Well, kind of wrong.

You see, Kayaba Coffee is not a buzzing new third-wave coffee shop. Rather, it has been a neighbourhood touchstone for nearly a century. Owner Inosuke Kayaba ran it from 1938 until his death in 2006, after which the Taito Cultural and Historical Society and neighbouring art gallery SCAI the Bathhouse formed a non-profit organisation to renovate and reopen it, keeping some beloved fixtures while going for a few modern touches like coffee from speciality roaster Fuglen.



Kayaba Coffee is one of Tokyo's *kissaten*, old-school coffee shops that became popular during the Meiji period, coinciding with loosening trade regulations and a growing interest in European affects. They're easy to recognise: a handful of two-seater tables clustered around a dark wood counter, where the dim light reveals shelves of well-used china, a wide selection of LPs and an array of alchemic paraphernalia to transmute beans and water into robust, dark coffee.

As social mores relaxed and public transportation proliferated in the early 20th century, more *kissaten* opened in the city, offering spaces where men and women could express their modern sensibilities by enjoying Westernised food and drinks. During the mid-1900s, when LP players were still an expensive luxury, you could head to your favourite jazz *kissa* to hear the latest recordings. *Kissaten* were social hubs and places to wheel and deal. There were a total of 155,000 of them countrywide in 1981, according to data compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication.

By 2016, that number tumbled to just 67,000, due to a deflating post-bubble economy in the 1990s, followed by a shift towards individual electronics and pressure from café chains. *Kissaten* shuttered left and right – those that hung on left many with the impression that the coffee shops were the dusty domain of chain-smoking grandpas.

In the last couple of years, however, young Tokyoites have been reclaiming *kissa* in the name of cool. Suddenly, popular lifestyle magazines like *Brutus* and *Hanako* are devoting lavish spreads to *kissa* older than the publications themselves, and a retro coffee shop date is the new Netflix and chill.



Which brings me back to the midweek queue at Kayaba Coffee. Before long, a waitress shows me past the handful of tables on the busy first floor to a comfortable tatami mat room on the second, filled with diffuse light from frosted windows. A few coffee-themed artworks hang on the walls, but it's mostly bare, except for a shelf of books along one wall. Rather than the battered manga and newspapers you usually find at a *kissaten*, it offers art books in several different languages.

At the table next to me, 25-year-old Rina Yuzurihara and her co-worker are enjoying Kayaba's famous egg salad sandwich after a morning strolling through the cherry blossoms at Ueno Park. She says she often visits both kissaten and chain coffee shops, depending on the kind of experience she wants to have.

"Living on your own in Tokyo, most young people don't have a tatami room," she says, "but they probably had one in the house they grew up in, so sitting on the tatami is quite nice and nostalgic."

One of the key characteristics of kissaten is the *funiki*, or ambience. Unlike the uniformity of chain cafés, kissaten have unique funiki, usually an extension of the owner's interests and passions, be it for classic jazz or antique clocks.

"Funiki is about how an owner or customer wants to portray themselves to others, how they want a space to make them feel," Claire Williamson explains. The 24-year-old assistant editor for Life and Culture at *The Japan Times* is a devoted kissa fan. "It's about separating yourself from daily life and elevating the coffee-drinking experience in some way."

One of her favourite retro kissa is Tsuta Coffee, opened in 1988 in the former home of famed architect and Budokan designer Mamoru Yamada. It's hidden away on a back street in Aoyama, the narrow entrance partially concealed between ivy-covered brick walls. Once you duck through the door, you are treated to views of a spacious garden that is mostly hidden from the street but revealed in full glory by the floor-to-ceiling window occupying one wall. Behind the dark wood bar and handful of tables, shelves of delicate white china coffee cups trimmed with gold and flower patterns line the shelves next to dainty gold spoons.

"There's that intimate, sort of word-of-mouth feel to it," Williamson says. "You either discover it yourself and there's that reward, or someone brings you and you're inducted into the world."

This in-the-know feeling is one way kissaten are different from Tokyo's famous third-wave coffee shops. They tend to have very little social media presence and basic Japanese-only websites, often relying on word-of-mouth.

Then there's that all-important funiki. Third-wave cafés often have the spare industrial interiors popular in the aughts, with plentiful power outlets and wall-facing workspaces for digital nomads. Kissaten come from a time before hand-held devices and WiFi, so their layouts foster a relaxing place to think or make a human connection.



Then there's the proprietor, called *momma* in Japanese, and how they approach their customers. Tsuta's master, Taiji Koyama, is known for his friendliness. Indeed, the second I pop my head in, he and his two young assistants beckon me to take a seat, offering a large table by the window – prime real estate – even though I am alone. Instead, I take a perch at the counter to watch the master at work.

A tidy, grey-haired gentleman with a pressed button-up shirt and loose-fitting apron, Koyama multi-tasks with the casual air of long experience, kindly answering my questions about the menu, chatting familiarly with the older gentleman beside me and carefully brewing high-end Brazilian Santos No. 2 beans roasted in-house. Classical violin music is a soothing background to the chatter.

With typical Japanese modesty, Koyama avoids speculating on why younger customers are choosing kissaten like his. "You'd have to ask each of them yourself why they are kind enough to visit," he says.

One of the shop assistants, Chiaki Hatori, a young woman in her early twenties, is more forthcoming. "Kissaten are like analog film. Digital might give you perfection, but it's cold," she says. Her generation, which has grown up with the ease and technical precision of the digital world, is now looking for something with more personality. As with photography, so with coffee. "With analog, the imperfections and idiosyncrasies give you a sense of warmth."

The peak years of the kissaten roughly overlap with the Showa Period from 1926 to 1989, and many of the surviving kissa embody the aesthetics of the time. Their worn leather, wood interiors and preponderance of bygone browns and beiges are offset by surreal flourishes meant to embody old ideas of Western opulence, like massive stained-glass windows or copper chandeliers studded with teardrop light bulbs. While older generations might find it nostalgic, younger Tokyoites appreciate it as a welcome departure from the bland sameness of chain shops, or the hyper-modern wood and steel favoured by hipster espresso bars.



It's a weekday evening, and I've come to Sabouru, a quirky kissaten in Jimbocho whose schizophrenic design ethos of tiki bar meets ski lodge is about as far from the careful chain monotony as possible. Since 1955, wooden masks from a mishmash of cultures have peered down from the walls between photographs of the owner through the years, arms chummily thrown across the shoulders of customers or celebrities, perhaps both.

There is an interesting mix of young businesspeople stopping in after work for a drink and college kids from the schools nearby. A young couple in hoodies hunches together at a tiny table, playing Pokémon Go, while an older woman in the severe black suit of a job hunter reads a novel and eats *napolitan*, an old-fashioned Japanese take on spaghetti using ketchup as a sauce. That kind of stolid, nostalgic fare fills the menu, not likely to win any Michelin stars but is reasonably priced and filling.





Ken Tanaka, a 28-year-old cooking teacher and artist, tells me this is one of his favourite kissa in Tokyo. “I like that there isn’t so much advertising everywhere,” he says. “I appreciate the scribbles on the walls and the cute waiters. They all dress so Showa!” The weird ambience has won him over, despite the mediocre coffee, he laughs.



Meanwhile, some kissa make the quality of their coffee the central selling point. One of the most popular is Chatei Hatou, opened in 1989. It’s now famous even beyond the borders of Japan as a favourite of Blue Bottle Coffee CEO James Freeman. In his book *The Blue Bottle Craft of Coffee*, Freeman waxes lyrical about the superlative technique of master Kazuya Terashima, calling his dedication to quality and service a daily inspiration.

There’s nothing cookie-cutter here. Terashima’s influence is in every step. He eschews scales and other standardising shortcuts, depending on his experienced senses to gauge the best blends and amounts for the beans on hand. He even chooses a cup from his vast collection of antique china for each guest based on their look or personality, carefully warming it with hot water before pouring their drink to ensure it’s served at the ideal temperature.

Tokyo’s coffee fans will make a pilgrimage to Chatei Hatou at some point, drawn by rave reviews of Terashima’s ¥950 (HK\$67) Go-Bancho, or “fifth avenue” blend. Converts say the steep price tag is worth every yen, particularly when paired with the delicately sweet chiffon cake made in house.



Ironically, while the rise of third-wave cafés may have been partially behind the decline of kissa in the '90s, the interest in speciality coffee it generated may be sustaining places like Chatei Hatou today. Of course, judging by the number of customers I watch snapping photos of their colourful china and the seasonal ikebana displays Terashima crafts himself, it's clear that there's more to it than coffee.

“When I opened, Shibuya was a really lively place, and it's only gotten more so since then,” Terashima says. “I wanted to create a place where people could forget all that hustle and bustle and just enjoy some good coffee and tea.”

“Chatei Hatou feels like a portal into another world,” grad student and long-time fan Kat Whatley says. “It's a total aesthetic experience. The coffee is served in beautiful cups, the music is always classical or jazz and it's such a warm and comfortable environment.”

The reasons for choosing kissaten are as varied as the shops themselves, but that in itself may be the answer. They are places where the product is still defined by an individual's passion, not marketing. They are places where you are recognised as an individual, not just a customer pushed to make a purchase. The coffee is just one of the many thoughtful details.

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“ Fly to Tokyo with Hong Kong Airlines and rediscover the caffeine haven! Click [here](#)

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### Bean there, done that

Take some of Tokyo's coffee culture home at these shops

**Koffee Mameya**

The java sommeliers will be more than happy to tailor a blend for you from a globe-spanning selection of beans. *4-15-3 Jingumae Shibuya-ku; koffee-mameya.com*

**Cafe Lapin**

The popular Lapin Blend, a mix of medium- and dark-roasted beans from Brazil, Colombia, Yemen and Guatemala, is always available. *3-15-7 Ueno, Taito-ku; café-lapin.shop-pro.jp*

**Glitch Coffee**

If you're a fan of light roasts head to Glitch for single-origin beans that have been ultra-light-roasted in a customised Probat machine. *3-16 Kanda-nishikicho, Chiyoda-ku; glitchcoffee.com*

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“ **Top places to eat, drink and stay, recommended by Tokyo resident Jessica Kozuka**



IMAGE: ALAMY (TOKYO PHOTOGRAPHIC ART MUSEUM)

**Eat**

## **Kamachiku**

Savour chewy *kamaage* udon and homestyle Japanese cooking in a beautiful brick warehouse from 1910. The current iteration was renovated by famed architect Kengo Kuma and features views on a traditional Japanese rock garden.

***2-14-18 Nezu, Bunkyo-ku; [kamachiku.com](http://kamachiku.com)***

## **Tigrato**

Take a break from Tokyo's brutal summer heat with homemade gelato at this unique cafe. Their other speciality is cocktails incorporating unusual Japanese ingredients from pickled plums to dried bonito. The espresso is top-notch too.

***3-6 Rokubancho, Chiyoda-ku; [tigrato.cafe](http://tigrato.cafe)***



## **Drink**

### **The SG Club**

Celebrity bartender Shingo Gokan has gathered a team of award-winning mixologists and created a creative cocktail joint with a shiny copper bar and retro denim

uniforms. The casual upstairs floor is open all day and serves a popular curry lunch, while the downstairs area is a more chic evening hideaway.

***1-7-8 Jinnan, Shibuya-ku; [fb.com/thesgclub](https://www.facebook.com/thesgclub)***

## **Culture**

### **Tokyo Photographic Art Museum**

The first museum in Tokyo to focus solely on photography reopened in 2016 after a two-year renovation. Besides an impressive public library, they also host multiple exhibitions featuring international and local photographers, including the always-popular World Press Photo Exhibition.

***1-13-3 Mita, Meguro-ku; [topmuseum.jp](https://www.topmuseum.jp)***

## **Stay**

### **Hoshinoya Tokyo**

This urban ryokan experience is worth every yen. It's in the centre of town, but with rooftop hot spring baths, a plush lounge with complimentary refreshments on each floor, comfortable custom yukatas, drinks and traditional entertainment provided each night and award-winning dining from chef Noriyuki Hamada available in-room or in the moody subterranean restaurant, you'll be hard pressed to venture out.



***1-9-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda-ku; [hoshinoya.com/tokyo](https://hoshinoya.com/tokyo)***