

## The Search for Tokyo's Heart and Soul

An amazing variety of treasures can be found and rich memories can be made, by venturing off Tokyo's main streets.

**Y**okocho in Japanese literally means side street. But in English, alley is probably a closer definition. Narrow, noisy, cluttered, crowded alley is even closer. And close is a key word too. Many of the bars and eateries are tiny, seating less than five customers, if they even have seating space. It is in yokocho where often you will find the proverbial “hole in the wall,” the customers standing in the street eating, drinking, talking loudly and laughing, and happily interacting with passers-by. Some yokocho are mainly bars and restaurants, but we went to Harmonica Yokocho, in the trending-now Tokyo suburb of Kichijoji, which is all this, and much more.

West of central Tokyo, Kichijoji is widely considered to be one of Tokyo's most desirable places to live. It is relatively close and easily connected by train to Shinjuku and Shibuya, but it's also a destination for people living further out. It has leafy residential areas with cafés and bistros, one of Tokyo's most varied and complete shopping areas, and the beautiful, vast Inokashira Park. And there is Harmonica Yokocho.

A member of the merchants association shared the somewhat shady history of the place. It is that of an illicit market in front of the station in the chaotic times following the war. It was a huge collection of tiny stalls selling fish, meat, pickles, eggs, and the like. With the development of the station building and the “super” market in the 1960s the stalls evolved into eating and drinking establishments. Sometime in the 1980s a famous literary critic is said to have likened the lines of tiny shops to the holes in a harmonica and so the name was established.

Colorful lanterns throughout a yokocho serve as an invitation and a welcome to customers.

### They even had children's books, and children browsing the stock

Harmonica Yokocho is a family affair. Many of the businesses have been family-run for generations. And it's still a market where ingredients are sold as before, but now the younger members of a family might run the restaurant next door serving those ingredients as meals. Some shops are only open during the day, and others only open at night. Some shops even rearrange the daytime merchandise and stay open at night as a different shop. Harmonica Yokocho has a tiny shop selling cakes for dogs. I found vintage salvage denim jeans with a button fly. Another shop was selling reworked kimonos. There are “pop-up” shops, for one night only. Tonight's pop-up was a used book store with a wide range. They even had children's books, and children browsing the stock.

### delivered quickly, excitedly, mixed-up, with frequent interruptions

We made friends with strangers, as you do in yokocho. Melanie, from France, and Marta from Spain are both relative newcomers to Japan. We asked them about their first impressions of Harmonica Yokocho;

“I really love all the colorful lanterns, lighted signs...”

“Everyone is always so very friendly and communicative.”

“I tried *oden* for the first time.”

“A lot of people were waving and greeting us when we tried to take some pictures.”

“I bought a kimono in a small little shop.

The lady helped me to try three different colors, bringing me a mirror from the back of the store.”

“I found the average of prices very fair and the environment was really enjoyable.”

“Really something I will recommend all my friends.”



One of the most fun facets of a yokocho, is sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with the people around you.



A shop master of a popular ramen shop interacts with customers through a small window.

The girls with cute French and Spanish accents, the communication is warm and positive albeit in language that is novel to them. Their spontaneous impressions are delivered quickly, excitedly, mixed-up, with frequent interruptions. This discourse conveys the diversity, vitality and authenticity of the stores and the people together with the jumbled atmosphere of the place. We're in Harmonica Yokocho.

*Oden*—a stew made with Japanese white radish, eggs, etc. in dashi(authentic soup stock).

