



The dignified and calm interior of Cafe L'ambre in Shinjuku.

The Pure and Simple Cafés of Tokyo

Coffee and so much more:
Tokyo *kissaten*

Tokyo is awash with globally recognized coffee chain stores, as are most cities around the world. However, the deluge of American West Coast coffee culture that began to permeate Japan in the late 90s did not extinguish the *jun-kissa*, or “pure and simple café”—two examples of which are introduced here.

The history of coffee in Japan can be traced back about 300 years, and the first coffee shop (or *kissaten*) opened for business in 1888. *Kissaten* continued to flourish up to the period before the Second World War, developing certain specializations, such as the *jun-kissa*, which did not serve alcohol.

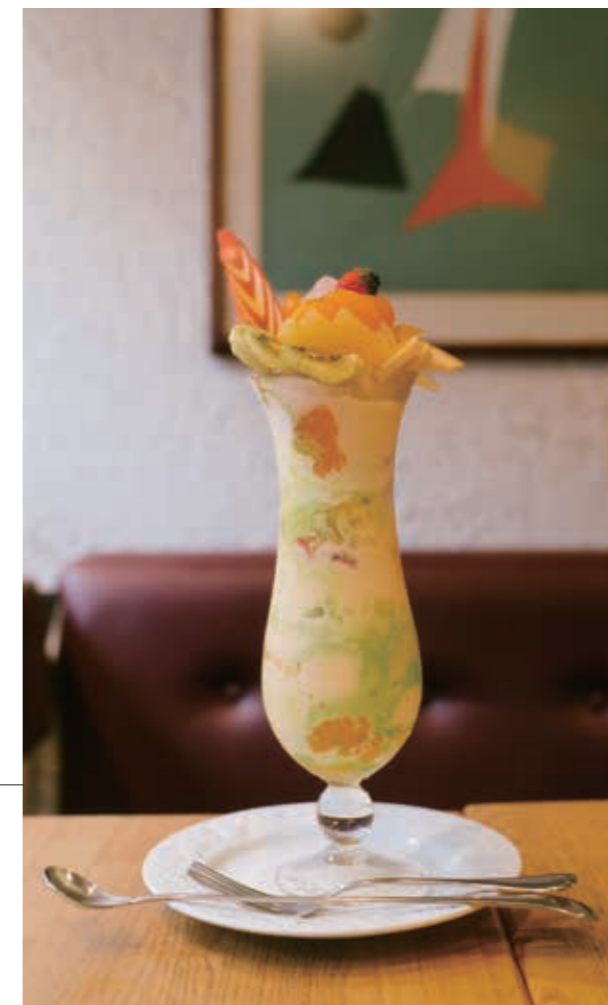
Coffee with added indulgences at Benisica

The Chinese character for *jun* (純) in *jun-kissa*, with its connotations of simplicity or being unadulterated, may create expectations of a certain Japanese asceticism. However, one look at the menu at Benisica will immediately disabuse you of such notions. Benisica opened in 1957 next to the train tracks near Yurakucho station. Its early claim to fame was as the first establishment to serve “pizza toast”—a Japanese homage to the Italian staple—and the menu has grown steadily since then, to include a wide variety of dishes both savory and sweet.

The coffee itself is brewed using syphons; a delightful hangover from the pre-war era but originating in Europe in the 18th century. Indeed, *kissaten* are an expression of Japan’s enduring fascination with western culture, and Benisica is no exception. The real standouts on the menu are the desserts: extravagant parfaits, decadent hotcakes, and crisp puff pastries that are a perennial draw for many customers who might stop by after spending an afternoon in the nearby up-market shopping district of Ginza.

Another distinct section of the clientele are fans of the Takarazuka Revue. The Tokyo home of the celebrated, all-female musical theater troupe is close by, and members of the cast are known to patronize Benisica from time to time.

One of the extravagant seasonal fruit parfaits of Benisica in Yurakucho.



Coffee with a classical accompaniment at L'ambre

Cafe L'ambre in Shinjuku offers a very different experience—both aurally and visually—to the comfortable clutter and unobtrusive jazz of Benisica. A staircase leads down from the ground floor and opens out on to a cavernous space resplendent with chandeliers and a mezzanine. Classical music ebbs and swells from large, antique speakers. The stately, slightly faded grandeur is all the more arresting due to its clandestine existence right beneath the hustle and bustle of Shinjuku, one of Tokyo’s most frenetic hubs. The menu is comparatively brief, but a pleasingly bitter coffee jelly leaves a lasting impression.

L'ambre is an example of *meikyoku* *kissaten*, or “famous classical music café.” The exorbitant price of vinyl records in the middle of the last century led to a proliferation of such establishments, where fans of classical music could come and enjoy their favorite works via audiophile sound systems. While their heyday is long since past, *meikyoku* *kissaten* still exist to cater to a wide range of customers.

Benisica and L'ambre are just two examples amongst a host of *jun-kissa* that continue to do business all over Tokyo and the country as a whole, anchored in tradition while coffee culture continues to evolve. Their sense of authenticity is enhanced by continuity at management level; with the founder’s wife still involved in the day to day running of the former, while the grandson of the founder has taken the reins at the latter. While superficially very different, all *jun-kissa* provide a place for respite and reflection, friendly conversation, appreciation of simple pleasures, and a good cup of coffee with something sweet on the side. Why not uncover some of the more secluded charms of Tokyo and find your own pure and simple café?