

A LOVE LETTER

TO

KISSATEN

Kissaten (called *kissa* by true connoisseurs) are a temporary escape from reality's pains for the price of a cup of coffee. Inside, it seems like nothing can hurt you. The soundtrack is mellow jazz on vinyl, the scent is dark roast beans mixed with wafts of tobacco, and the grand event is a grandfatherly owner called a "master" pouring your drink into a fine porcelain teacup. There's a certain stillness, a satin smoothness, that remains in people's movements even when it's technically bustling.

Younger people are embracing them as urban Japan's third spaces, despite their dwindling numbers as elderly owners close shop. City apartments are too cramped, and *kissaten* (with interiors ranging from cosy living rooms to opulent palace-like salons) encourage you to stay a while; read a tattered manga, sit, meet, smoke a cig (broodingly), and dissolve into your thoughts—all with a pastry by your side. They're spaces heavily defined by their owners' temperaments and idiosyncrasies, micro-cult personalities that make each shop feel like a second home. The perfect mix of being together and alone.

If you've never been to a *kissaten*, consider this a way to experience one vicariously, and if you have, read this as a love letter to these humbly grand cafés, told through two Tokyo perspectives: a veteran manager, Emi Nishida, of the legendary *kissaten* Coffee Aristocrat Edinburgh in Shinjuku (one of the last of a dying breed: it's 24 hours and smoker-friendly), and a new-wave *kissaten* owner, Koyuki Kurata, who opened Kissa Koyuki in Itabashi in her twenties and is preserving these shops for a younger generation through a Y2K Heisei font that reflects her eclectic personal style.

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THE ORIGIN: A COLLEGE DROP-OUT AND JAPAN'S FIRST *KISSATEN*

Kissaten are a cultural remix: an imagining of the West that never existed, co-opted by Japanese sensibilities. Despite their name literally meaning "consume-tea-shop", *kissaten* were inspired by Western European coffee houses of the 1880s. Think: leather armchairs, communal newspapers, dark wood paneling, crystal chandeliers—a small palace for coffee consumption.

The founder of Japan's first coffee shop, Kahi Chakan in 1888, was Tei Eikei, who studied at Yale (quit or flunked out after two years) but managed to frequent London's coffeehouses, nicknamed "penny universities". At these places, often open to men only, intellectuals, students, poets, artists, and outcasts gathered to speak freely and meet others with a bit more sophistication than a bar. Nishimura's coffee house closed little over five years later, but the *kissaten*'s role as a place to drink coffee and linger would gain footing in the next century.



KISSATEN BECOME A JAPANESE ICON: THE SHOWA ERA 1926-1989

Fast forward a couple of decades, and *kissaten* became a staple of every Japanese neighborhood. By 1981 there were 155,000 cafes, split into subgenres reflecting their owners' personalities and the subcultural groups who became their regulars. They were the few spaces during more conservative times where men and women could run into each other (not an office, not a home), and strike up a conversation. Some *kissaten* are for chatting, some have an unofficial code of silence, and some are for listening to music. Many specialise in painstakingly brewing single-origin beans cup by cup. While others serve subpar, burnt coffee, popular for their vibes alone.

The quintessential *kissaten* exists in a quiet alley near a station, run by minimal staff (an older husband-wife duo). The interior feels like your grandmother's kitchen mixed with charming flea market clutter accumulated reflecting their owners' peculiar penchants: posters, statues, bonsai, ashtrays, glass trinkets. The walls are yellowed with smoke, crooked picture frames decorate every wall. Many open very early or stay alive late into the night.

The *kissaten* menu mixes American and European dishes introduced post-World War Two (*omurice*, Spaghetti Neapolitan—a dish made with tomato sauce and hotdog pieces; melon soda with its perfectly cylindrical scoop of vanilla ice cream and maraschino cherry) and offerings from the Portuguese and Dutch, some of the first non-Eastern cultures Japan encountered through trade. Castella cake, custard pudding similar to flan with gelatinous caramel glaze, and even coffee itself, introduced by Dutch traders in the 16th century.

SUB-GENRES OF *KISSATEN*

JAZZ KISSATEN

Coffee shops that peaked in the '50s, owned by music lovers for the love of the game, usually less-than-savvy business people. Few foreign performers made it to Japan at this time, and records were expensive for the average person to collect. In these spaces, young people heard the latest music while flirting with the staff and each other.

MANGA KISSATEN

Created in the '70s in Nagoya to lure customers, filled to the brim with shelves of manga. Later equipped with rentable computers and wifi, with customers paying by the hour. These *kissa's* are the influence behind modern-day net-cafes.

MEIYOKU-KISSA

Devoted to classical and Latin music with phenomenal sound systems. Space where music is enjoyed with undiluted attention and talking above a whisper is often prohibited.













WAYS OF BREWING COFFEE

Unlike Western counterparts, *kissaten* usually skip espresso machines or batch-brewed coffee (the pleasantly burnt kind you'd find in a diner). Instead, many brew each cup by hand. Here are some kissa-specific methods.

NEL DRIP

Coffee poured through flannel cloth instead of paper. Though not invented in Japan, the method became a *kissaten* signature after most Western shops abandoned it for paper filters. The softer flannel lets more of the cloth's natural oils through, creating smooth, velvety taste.

POUR-OVER

Hot water poured in slow, deliberate circles over grounds in a cone-shaped dripper, usually with a gooseneck kettle. Preferred for single-origin coffee because it highlights a bean's specific flavor notes.

SIPHON

A bit theatrical. Looking like some sort of double beaker, the water heats in the bottom chamber until vapor pressure forces it up to brew with the grounds. Remove the heat source and a vacuum pulls the finished coffee back down through a filter. The result is light and tea-like brew.





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COFFEE ARISTOCRAT EDINBURGH

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EACH SHOP, A PIECE OF THE OWNER'S SOUL: AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO *KISSATEN* MASTERS

Coffee Aristocrat Edinburgh in Shinjuku, near Kabuchikō's red-light district, is one of the last 24-hour *kissaten* still standing. Nonetheless, its manager, Nishida Emi, has maintained a space of unwavering consistency, running it like the navy (but with more caffeine). In her words, "There are so many loners. It really is about providing a place to belong."

The menu hasn't changed in 40 years. During COVID, while other businesses closed, Edinburgh stayed open just so its dedicated customers, actors, salarymen, and students, would have a place of consistency, somewhere to go. "It's not home, but it's like a second home," Nishida says.

The place looks like the set of a hard-boiled detective novel, with green pleather booths and marble tables, and gold-rimmed sugar cube bowls. However, the tools it prides itself on: its retro methods of brewing and serving coffee are disappearing. The gas burners, proper tableware, it's beaker-like glass siphons. "You definitely don't want electric equipment," she insists. "I plan to work here until I die. But with younger folks, I can't force that on them. It feels heavy." Many of her staff are actors, and she tells them, "If you can't work at our store, you won't be able to succeed as an actor."





KISSA KOYUKI

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KISSA KOYUKI



Across Tokyo in the Itabashi ward, 30-year-old Koyuki Kurata opened Kissa Koyuki in 2023. She took over a space in Itabashi where she grew up and has lived all her life, where an older woman had run a coffee shop decades prior.

Kurata kept some existing pieces (the table lamps, the entrance door), then built her own world: pink and beige tones, Hello Kitty, leopard print, a gyaru-made daruma doll, city-pop singer Nakamori Akina posters, bonsai. "Everything here is stuff I like," she says.

On weekends, she serves more cream sodas in heart-shaped glasses than coffee. High school girls come for the Instagram moments but she wants the space to be for all types of people. This isn't what Edinburgh does, but it's the same impulse: an owner pouring themselves completely into a space, crafting a world that mirrors their likes, dislikes, and ideas of home. Koyuki gets why "passing down" a long-running store seems impossible. "Your feelings about your shop, your customers, they're so personal you can't just hand it over." Instead, she believes young people need to open their own places. "That way the culture won't die out."

Her advice: "Accumulate experiences, good ones and bad ones. Even experiences that seem completely unrelated can suddenly become useful." After many years of working in coffee shops since she was a student, she has no regrets about making the rare leap into ownership.

Kissa Koyuki isn't the noir-ish vibe of Edinburgh, but both are what *kissaten* have always been: spaces meticulously crafted around their owners' obsessions, temperaments, and peculiar loves shared with anyone who stops by—hopefully a reminder that the spirit of the *kissaten* can live on just in new forms.