

# Kodawari, Kissaten, and Coffee Culture in Japan

1888, Tokyo: Japan's first *kissaten* (traditional coffeehouse) opened. Over the following century, *kissaten* dedicated to specialized brewing would win Japan an international reputation for quality coffee.

When coffee first arrived in Japan around 1700, it did not immediately suit local tastes. It was favored by Dutch merchants and traders headquartered in Nagasaki and took hold only gradually in Japanese society, originally for medicinal purposes, or as a foreign curiosity. 大田 南畝 Ōta Nanpo, a revered poet born in 1749, notoriously said, "I was recommended *Kauhii* (coffee) on a red-haired (Dutch) boat. Beans are roasted black and powdered, and white sugar is added. It smells burnt and I can't stand the taste."

Merry White, professor of anthropology at Boston University in the United States, details in *Coffee Life in Japan* that after the 1860s, during the Meiji era (1868–1912), coffee-drinking made its way to the countryside: there, *koohiito*, a ball of ground coffee and sugar (sometimes offered to children as a treat) was a crude type of instant coffee that could be dropped into hot water and easily drunk.

Coffee consumption really took hold in the early 1900s. The Taishō period (1912–1926) is considered

Japan's jazz era. During the preceding Meiji era, elements of Western culture became trendy in Japan, but the liberal movement known as Taishō democracy further adapted Western culture into a new, Japanese modern aesthetic. During this time, 喫茶店 *kissaten* (coffee shops) began to proliferate, popularizing the モーニングセット *mōningusetto* (morning set, or morning service), a light, Western-style breakfast of tea or coffee, thick-cut toast, sometimes served with red bean jam (particularly in Nagoya), egg, and sometimes fruit, salad, and fish.

Various styles of *kissaten* emerged: while some focused on entertainment, music, serving alcohol, or even operating as erotic venues, others focused purely on the art of coffee making. A fascination with the different ways to brew coffee resulted in various *kissatens* specializing in a particular brewing method, a unique house blend, or another theme.

White and others note that the Japanese philosophy of *kodawari* (commitment) is a key part of *kissaten* culture. *Kodawari* is the striving for perfection, attention to detail, precision, and quality that the Japanese are well known for. In coffee, this approach is applied to everything from innovation, such as the manufacture of coffee equipment, to the selection of コーヒー豆 *kōhī mame* (coffee beans), and brewing methods. The quality-focused specialty-coffee movement began to take shape, and Japan is now recognized as a world leader.

Today, Japanese brewing trends, including the pour-over, siphon, and slow-drip cold-brew methods, are popular in specialty cafés outside of Japan, too. White notes that while the Japanese originally thought the espresso to be too mechanical and not handmade enough, espresso-brewing now has its own *kodawari*.

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