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In this
issue:

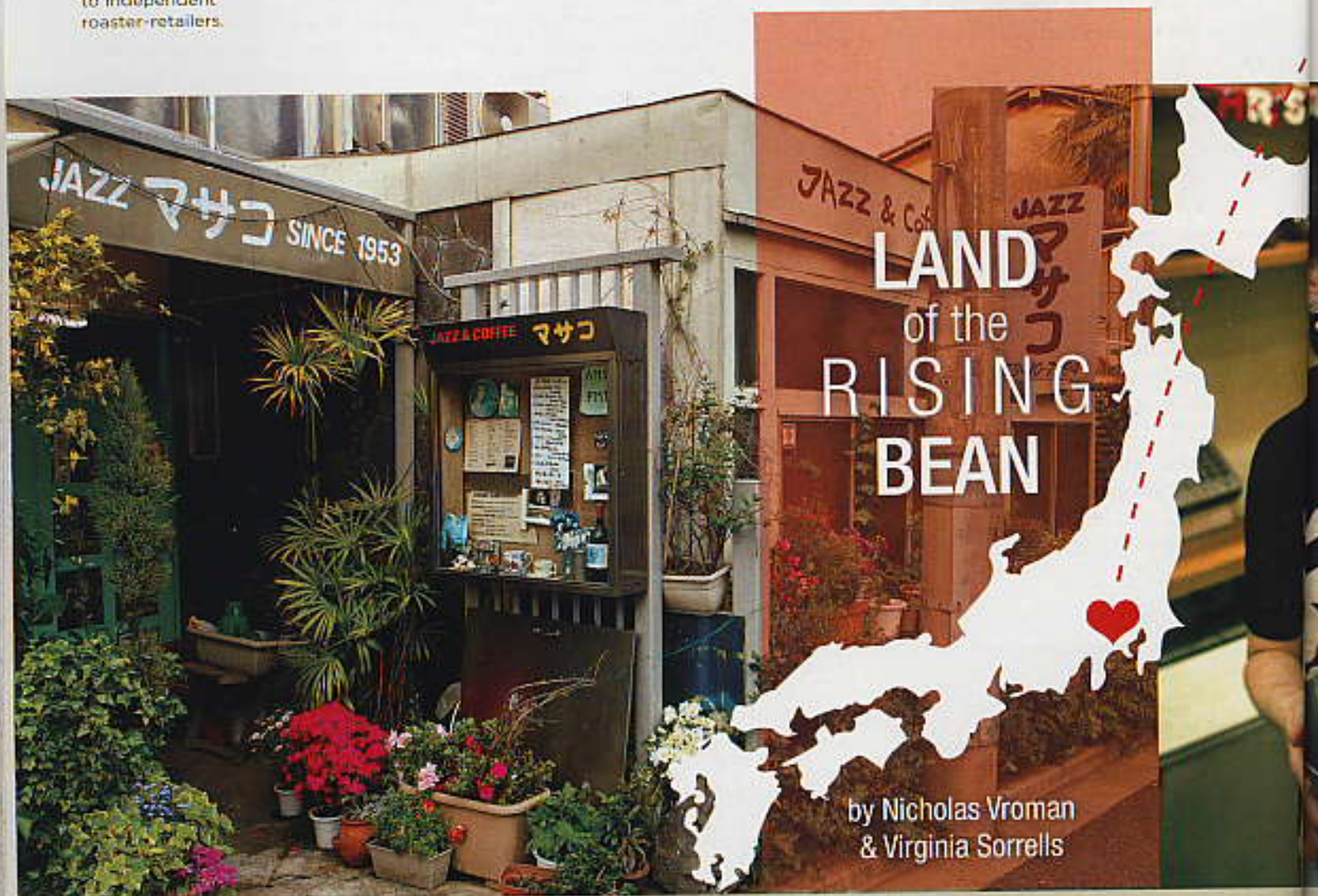
POS SYSTEMS
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JAPAN: LAND
OF THE
RISING BEAN

THE MAGAZINE FOR SPECIALTY COFFEE & TEA PROFESSIONALS SINCE 1992

KISSATEN CULTURE:

A resurgent market in Japan features no shortage of coffee shops, from chains to independent roaster-retailers.



When thinking of coffee-drinking nations, Japan isn't the first country that comes to mind. Its hot beverages of choice are typically thought to be tea and sake, even though according to the International Coffee Association, over the last few years Japan has consistently ranked among the top four coffee-importing nations in the world. Coffee is huge in Japan, and getting bigger by the day.

Coffee shops were first introduced to Japan in the Meiji period (1868-1912). After nearly 200 years of self-imposed isolation, the Land of the Rising Sun jumped headfirst into the modern world, and its hunger for all things Western was voracious. Modeled after European cafés, coffeehouses (called *kissaten*) were all the rage, introducing a novel brew that represented Western elegance. Each cup of coffee was prepared individually, often using a siphon system that, at the time, might have

resembled a contraption from a mad scientist's laboratory. After that, coffee culture never let up. During post-war reconstruction, *kissaten* culture became even more modern, and a nexus for jazz music fandom. The shops were comfortable extensions of the Western living room, offering simple sandwiches and light meals, and catering to an upwardly mobile society looking yet again to the West for inspiration.

Japan's coffee world changed again on August 2, 1996, when Starbucks opened its first Japanese store in the Ginza district of Tokyo, launching a wave of chain-style coffee shops tailored to a post-*kissaten* generation. Tully's and other U.S. coffee concerns have also become ubiquitous. The homegrown Doutor/Excelsior giant saw the changing market and responded accordingly, creating not one but two chains that offer different ambiances and prices to suit a coffee-mad population. In the contemporary mix as well are numerous independent cafés and roasters. And the *kis-*



As Japan's **love** of coffee grows,
so does the **personal touch**,
with roast-to-order retailers

saten culture, which had fallen on some hard times since its heyday in the 1960s, is thriving again, benefiting from its decidedly retro appeal and its unique and delicious siphon-brewed coffee. In an overheated market reminiscent of the days when coffeehouses began to change the landscape of American coffee consumption, neo-traditional coffee marketers in Japan are working hard to capture and develop new customers.

Near every neighborhood train stop in Tokyo, there are numerous coffee shops and perhaps an independent roaster or two, not to mention supermarkets and specialty stores that sell gourmet coffee. The market in Japan is a highly competitive space, but in a country with more than 100 million potential coffee drinkers, the temptation to make a go of it is just as fierce.

One particularly innovative trend staking a claim in Japan is small-batch custom roasting. Different from the tradition of

micro-roasting in the United States, these retailers roast as little as 100 grams on demand for customers who watch and wait while sipping a small cup of complimentary coffee. Independent and chain custom roasters of this ilk seem to be popping up weekly in neighborhoods throughout metropolitan Tokyo, adding a new spin on an already lively coffee culture.

Walking down Shinjuku Dori, a wide boulevard that links the traditional commercial and office district of Yotsuya to the lively entertainment district of Shinjuku, one passes a number of coffee places. Just down the street from a Doutor café on Shinjuku Dori is a Moriva coffee shop, serving sandwiches and sweets along with its 180-yen (\$1.95) cup of coffee. No more than two blocks away is an Excelsior, a few doors down from

continued on page 46

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Tully's. A funky old second-story café called Hamondo has a broken and tape-repaired plastic sign proudly advertising the Japanese equivalent of MJB.

Next door to a Starbucks near the Yotsuya-sanchome subway station is a small, brightly lit custom roastery called Midori no Coffee Mame (which means "green coffee beans")—Yotsuya. As befits a no-nonsense business area, it's all clean lines, with modern blond wood furniture and counters. Middle-aged women seem to be the majority at any given time. The little storefront has a regular flow of customers of all ages coming in for a leisurely sit-down or to purchase a bag of freshly roasted coffee from the selection of green beans in clear cylindrical plexiglass bins lining the wall that leads to the counter.



MIDORI NO COFFEE MAME offers 15 blends, including the Ladies' Blend and the Men's Blend.

Clearly reflecting the shop's target market, loyal customer Tomoko Hashino, a petite 50-something woman, explains, "Every day the shop chooses one kind of coffee they call the coffee of the day. That's what's available for their brewed coffee. So the customer can only drink the coffee of the day. And they serve you a small cup for tasting while your coffee's being roasted. I like that. I've been able to try many different kinds of coffee. But I still like my coffee not so bitter, not so sour—with a soft taste. Not too strong."

Midori no Coffee Mame offers 21 different regional coffees, 15 blends and one or two seasonal blends at any given time. The shop's regional coffees include Mexico AL, Guatemala SHB, Colombia Supremo, Brazil Santos No. 2, Jamaica Blue Mountain No. 1, Kona Extra Fancy, Papua New Guinea AA, Celebes Kalossi Toraja, Sumatra Mandheling G1, India Plantation AA, Ethiopian Mocha Harar, Yemen Mocha Matari, Kenya AA and Kilimanjaro AA. The shop's blends, along with various house and espresso styles, include such novelties as Ladies' Blend and Acid Blend. Store manager Yasuko Imahashi describes Ladies' Blend as "close to American-style coffee." Coffee aficionados and amateurs certainly have more choices here than they do at

many other coffee shops.

Plus, they get the added choice of having beans roasted whatever way they like.

Each bin of coffee at Midori no Coffee Mame has an easy-to-read coding that describes the taste qualities of each coffee and roasting recommendations to bring out those desired qualities. For the uninitiated, there is a simple chart that has symbols describing four basic tastes to look for in your coffee: a circle for mild (*miruika ajike*), a diamond for bitter (*niganike*), a triangle for sour (*sousanmike*) and a square for thick (*koku ajike*, with a nuance in Japanese meaning "rich" or "heavy bodied"). Though Midori no Coffee Mame describes its coffee using both English and Japanese, some subtleties can be lost in translation. Sour, or *sousanmike*, includes the sense of something having a bracing or refreshing acidity. Thick, or *koku ajike*, offers the nuances of a rich or heavy body. And bitter, or *niganike*, comes directly from the traditional five tastes that Japan borrowed from ancient China: bitter, salty, sour, sweet and spicy. In the West, bitterness is often associated with the unpalatable, while the Japanese palate tends to be more accepting of it in food and drink.

Posted near the roaster is yet another chart describing the roasting variations—medium, city, full-city and espresso—and a description of the qualities that each roast brings to the beans. Each bin of coffee is labeled with its name, the coding for recommended roasting and the qualities expected from each roast. For example, the shop's Kona Extra Fancy roasted city-style is described as delivering a mild taste with a bit of a sour edge, and the full-city treatment delivers a more bitter edge to its still-mild taste. It's a simple and user-friendly system. The same information is available on the company's Web site. Customers also can set up home delivery of freshly roasted coffee.

However, what does Midori no Coffee Mame do when a customer demands an espresso roast for delicate lowland tropical coffee? Imahashi, demonstrating a perfect Japanese-style graciousness in service, says she would "brew a cup of coffee in the recommended way for the customer to taste, but ultimately do what the customer wants." She adds, "And even though we offer light roast, we generally don't recommend it for our coffees."

Midori no Coffee Mame—Yotsuya is less than a year old. It's part of a new franchising concept that offers image, concept and product to otherwise independently run operations. How it will ultimately play out is yet unknown. Says Imahashi, "At first it was hard to know how customers would react because some people had never even seen raw beans. But by serving our coffee, customers realized, 'Oh, I like that taste.' Tasting the brewed coffee, they gradually started buying beans themselves. At first it was hard, but after one year it's getting better and better."

In another part of town, the funky and trendy neighborhood of Shimokitazawa, another style of roast-to-order coffee retailer has made a stand. Yanaka is a small chain, now with 15 shops, that has the same basic concept as Midori no Coffee Mame, but with a completely different look and style. In a neighborhood

continued on page 46

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rich with fashionable boutiques, *izakaya* (Japanese-style pubs), traditional food shops, cutting-edge bars and concept restaurants, Yanaka looks like it has been around for decades. Apart from the warm, wooden interior and burlap-lined bins, there's a traditional *noren*, a short curtain that Japanese merchants hang outside their shops to denote what kind of shop it is and, more importantly, to show that the shop is open.

The concept and design of the Yanaka shops was created by Abe Architecture, an innovative firm that has its feet in traditional building methods, reusing and recycling old materials, and using solar power and green ideas for new structures. This concept fits well with the *shitamachi* (old town) aesthetic modeled on pre-war

Tokyo that's experiencing a contemporary revival after years of urban destruction in the name of building a "modern" Japan.

But despite an inviting retro design, this is a very modern coffee retailer. A fully integrated and smart marketing concept is tied together with a distinctive logo, branded items including coffee gift packages, tumblers, bags, sugar packages and *fuoshiki*—a kind of Japanese wrapping cloth—and an easy-to-use Web site.

Like many modern roasters, Yanaka has been building on its cyber-marketing. In a tiny office upstairs from the Yanaka store in the bustling business district of Kanda, employee Horikoshi Mikiko introduces herself with a self-effacing chuckle. "I'm in charge of the Internet-sales department. It's a department of one. I mostly deal with individual customers for online sales of our coffee."

Starting with Yanaka on the retail front lines seven years ago, Mikiko got "bumped upstairs" just over three years ago. For a company with a smart Web presence, the move into online marketing seemed decidedly informal. As she explains, "We didn't make too much of an effort at first, but once we really decided to get going with retail sales on the Internet, it's grown very quickly. I attribute it to people coming to the shop, buying coffee and then discovering that they can order it online. They become regular online buyers. And many have been great at spreading the news by word of mouth. We do overnight delivery to everywhere in Japan except Hokkaido and Okinawa."

Working in the retail shop and now with online sales, Mikiko has grown along with her customer service skills. "I find the whole experience interesting," she says. "I've learned a lot. But I also end up dealing with some people who are quite fussy and

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some who are fussy and ... very knowledgeable. And that can be challenging. They say things like, 'This bean usually has a deeper flavor' or some other specific comment regarding taste or quality of the coffee. You're sometimes dealing with people who really know their coffee. It's not so much dealing with complaints, but with people who have a very particular desire when it comes to what they want from their coffee."

Mikiko's workspace is a monument to the personalized service Yanaka offers. The roaster commands at least half the space in the cramped office. Frequently, she will download a custom order and proceed directly to the roaster to process it herself. A private messenger company then picks up the freshly roasted coffee, usually within an hour or two after the order is received. "You have to listen very carefully to what the customer is saying, because everyone has different tastes—in the same way that you and I can drink the same cup of coffee and have a very different sense of how it tastes. And because people have different likes and dislikes—some people like their coffee acidic, some people like bitter coffee—you firstly have to try and meet their needs."

And as to her view of the future of how Yanaka may survive and thrive in difficult economic times, Mikiko offers simple optimism. "Over the last 10, 11 years we've been around, our business hasn't shot up anyway with booming sales. It's been a slow growth curve, a gradual increase. I think that, if anything, sales might actually continue to increase, or rather, our consumer base will continue to increase steadily. If the recession continues for some time, I think people may prefer to make their coffee at home, rather than going out to Starbucks or other shops to sit down and have a cup of coffee.

And the prices at Yanaka are, compared to most shops, quite low. So for people who still want to get good coffee, but may be looking close at what their yen can buy, they can still get quality coffee at our shop."

Even as major chains are closing shops worldwide, the Japanese thirst for foreign chain-style coffee emporiums continues. But these new coffee entrepreneurs are betting that in the seemingly bottomless cup that is the Japanese coffee market, customers will choose a more personal and traditional coffee experience, whether sipping a cup at the local kissaten or sitting at their home computer. ☉



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