

No clinking

GRANT EVANS Merry White

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978 0 520 27115 9 "Hope you you are enjoying the tea!", a friend recently quipped in an email to me here in Kyoto, the old royal capital of Japan where I am living. The elaborate tea ceremony, an icon of Japanese culture (now joined by green tea ice cream), has created the misguided impression that the Japanese are exclusively tea drinkers. In fact they are the third largest consumers of coffee in the world, and have been dedicated coffee drinkers since the late nineteenth century. The tea-drinking English, and Americans with their insipid brew, have nothing to teach Japanese connoisseurs about coffee.

In Kyoto one might expect tea "tradition" to prevail, but tiny cafés are everywhere, some of which feature in Merry White's book, such as the Hanafusa café that specializes in siphon coffee. A cup from the top of the range here will cost around \$15, brewed expertly by two bow-tied gents who make the term "barista" passé. Merry White has whiled away many hours in cafés in Japan in her professional role as an anthropologist, and wishes to communicate the diversity and intimacy one can experience in them. Themed cafés, musical cafés, artistic cafés, or simply quiet cafés that provide an extra living room, away from the small houses most Japanese inhabit. She writes, for example, of one classical music café in Kyoto where the seating is arranged in front of a bank of speakers as if one is listening to a concert: "The coffee too must be quiet: it arrives in a cup on a soft leather mat, no saucer, and I am given a soft wooden spoon for stirring, no clinking, no clanking".

White provides several intriguing portraits of the café operators, calling them "Masters of Their Universes", not only because of the way they stamp their personality on the café but also because of their kodawari, i.e. their fastidiousness and passion about producing good coffee. It is a concern for quality which has made Japan a leader in the quality coffee market internationally. The artisanal ethos that goes with this also makes Japan resistant to the now ubiquitous coffee machines, favouring instead various hands-on forms of filtered, brewed or siphoned coffee. Opening a café can reflect "the desire for a project engaging the husband and wife as a team, in an 'affectionate enterprise'", or a postretirement option, one that caters to Japan's ever-growing aged population.

Japan found its own way to coffee, via labour migrants to Brazil who soon became coffee producers. A slump in the global sales in 1905 saw Japan targeted by the Brazilian industry as a potential new market. Mizuno Ryu, once a coffee worker, became Japan's "coffee czar", setting up the first Brazilianstyle café in Tokyo in 1908, the Café Paulista, which quickly expanded and became the world's first coffee chain. It is still in business, and in

the whole of Japan there are today some 83,000 kissaten, cafés, with Osaka having the greatest number of them per square kilometre. Indeed, it was a Japanese working in Chicago, Dr Satoru Kato, who invented instant coffee, and White reproduces his application for a patent, dated 1903: "I, Satori Kato, a subject of the Emperor of Japan, ... have invented certain new and useful Improvements in Coffee Concentrate ... ". Cafés were new urban spaces opened by the Meiji (1868-1912) drive for modernity, and created new democratic rules of social interaction. For Japanese who had experienced the café scene in Europe, they could also become sites for intellectual, artistic and political education. "'Modern' in the café was female", writes White, "whether embodied in the moga (modern girl) or the waitress Just by their presence in cafés, women performed a modern act - that of being in public." Waitresses wore modern kimono fashions, displacing the trend-setting of the geisha and pushing them into their modern role as guardians of tradition. Although coffee was described as "dry inebriation" in contrast to the "wet inebriation" of the bars, sex was not far away, and some early establishments provided "subway service", oral sex under the tables, or "customers could fondle a waitress through strategically placed slits below her kimono waist". Today there are "no pantsu" waitresses walking across mirror floors in very short skirts.

Merry White's book, unfortunately, is annoyingly repetitious. She puffs up often fairly straightforward observations about coffee's role in modern Japan with academic jargon. There are over-lengthy disquisitions on modern Japanese urban life, with genuflections in the direction of Walter Benjamin: "These spaces might serve as seats for transient flaneurs, or anomic places contrasting with the overdetermined, hypernomic social frame in which most Japanese urban people live". And, in the "dry inebriation" of this genre of writing, she strains to show cafés as sites of transgression, resistance or rebellion. However, White saves the day by providing a wonderful annotated guide to the cafés of Tokyo and Kyoto.