Tokyo’s cafes, old and new

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Enticing the coffee-and-cake set to perk up for spring

By Louis Templado, Special to *The Japan Times*

Cafe Apollinaire, Cafe de Flore, Cafe du President, Brasserie Aux Bacchanales: sparkling names that belong to the most luminous cafes in the City of Lights? But though the signs are in French, the menu cards are in Japanese, as are the seated boulevardiers, stylishly mixing and matching Chanel No. 19 with latte and Hello Kitty with Pernod. Welcome to fin-de-siecle Tokyo, where the Parisian cafe is alive and well, an emigre in the city of neon.

Cafes are nothing new to Japan, a country where 205,195 establishments (last counted in 1989, the start of Heisei) create the highest caffeine outlet-to-consumer ratio in the world. Yet up until now sitting in a coffee shop has never been an event. Today's latest sidewalk perches with their parasols and starched-cuff staff decidedly are -- adding style to what once were moribund corners of the city and the restaurant industry.

"We want our customers to feel that they've stepped out of their ordinary lives and into something special," said Naoki Fukushima, restaurateur and manager of Harajuku's Brasserie Aux Bacchanales. An early leader of the streetwise cafe boom, Bacchanales, like the others which followed it, is notable for its typically Japanese attention to authenticity. The Serge Gainsbourg fan club of Japan, for example, was called in for the cafe's grand opening celebration last March -- with each member dutifully brandishing a Pernod in one hand and a Gauloise in the other. "Another thing we want, though, is for customers to feel that this cafe is a regular part of their lives, that they can come in at anytime, that this is their place in the city," Fukushima said.

Fukushima points out the genuine Parisian fixtures (imported from England because they're no longer made in France) and waiters (one from Lyon) that welcome customers into the smoky din of Bacchanales. The atmosphere is surprisingly genuine: The waiters are both rude and playful, and the Japanese clientele -- for the most part looking like tourists in their own country -- are often

outnumbered by roisterous expat francophones and bohemians. "I think they [the foreigners] are a sign of good business," said Fukushima. "Their presence shows we've succeeded, and they attract other customers." Predictably, habitues have already shortened the cafe's name to "Baka," a term meaning "foolish" or "idiotic" in Japanese.

In the year since its opening, several other cafes have opened within view -- if not earshot -- of Baka. Despite upping the ante on brass and fixtures, few have come close to reproducing an atmosphere as successfully as Bacchanales has done.There are now, according to a recent Nihon Keizai Shimbun count, more than 50 French-style sidewalk cafes in upscale Minato, Shibuya and Chuo wards alone. "Office ladies" -- representative young women with disposable incomes and a penchant for cellular telephony -- make up the majority of customers, although students, salarymen and an occasional foreign tourist are thrown into the mix. "They're trying so hard here," quipped a Canadian visitor watching the robotics in a large cafe on the major Omotesando intersection. "It all looks like chocolate. It smells like chocolate. But it's not chocolate."

Although most of the cafes would seem better planted on Main Street, Disneyland, than on the Rue St. Michel, their popularity is grounded in post-"bubble" economics. To the young, recession-conscious Japanese they are a chance to live out a continental image of luxury at fairly small expense. Unlike karaoke, bars and clubs, where additional charges are usually involved, 1,000 yen is enough to rent a roost and sip for a couple of hours.

Still, the cynical may question how many of the establishments will be around when Tokyo's insatiable taunu johoshi (city magazines) point out the next grazing fields. "That is really not a concern for us," said Fukushima. "These other cafes are simply in it for the money. We want to make a place people can make a connection with, where you can come back to after a long time and say, 'Hey, it's still here, and that waiter is still there.'"

But even as these sidewalk enterprises tool up for the spring, Tokyo's own unique theme cafes -- a homegrown cafe culture of special-interest kissaten -- languish in their winter. Often located off the flow of pedestrian traffic and trends, these Showa Era haunts offer a view of what Tokyo was like when shinkansen were new and Haneda was the city's international airport. The trouble is finding them.

"It's lucky that this place has such a quiet location," said Muneo Ishihara, the 65-year-old proprietor of Lion, a 50-year-old cafe set down a lovers' lane among the boutique hotels of Shibuya's Dogenzaka area. "The rent anywhere else would have put us out of business a long time ago."

The statement is drowned in a crescendo of violins and tympani, blasting from a stack of speakers set at the front of the salon. Classical music -- the high-fidelity kind -- fills the dark corners and balconies of the structure, the interior suggesting both a theater and a Pullman. Here, instead of a menu, a small pamphlet detailing the month's musical selections is brought to the table. Over 5,000 recordings are kept in stock and "performances" are conducted daily at 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. ... in between, customers are free to make requests.

"We originally started playing popular music to attract customers," said Ishihara, who says he took over the business from a brother-in-law just after the war. (The original building dates from the '20s but was destroyed in the 1945 fire-bombings). "But that sort of music just went in and out of fashion too soon. It took a lot of money to keep replacing the records, so we decided to play classical instead. It doesn't change so much."

Lion and a few others, according to Ishihara, are the survivors of an earlier cafe boom which started before the war and peaked in the '60s and early '70s. The Classic Cafe in Nakano (where cream is

served in thimbles and toothpaste caps), for example, works the same musical turf as Lion, while Swing Cafe in Shibuya's Udagawacho and Eigakan in Hakusan serve up analogue jazz with the burendo kohii. The berets and finger-snapping have long since disappeared and the clientele has aged, but the regulars still come: some for privacy (talking is discouraged), some for study or napping, and some just for the volume.

Moving between the high-backed velvet chairs, a college student in a Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds T-shirt is the youngest person in Lion. "He's a part-time waiter," says Ishihara wistfully. "My own children are grown and they don't want to continue this business. It's not really profitable and the hours are long."

Still, new kids on the block keep coming. Internet cafes, a concept popular for several years now in America and Europe, have been slow getting to Tokyo but are now the toast of the town. Just as the prefixes "cyber," "electronic," "net" or "web" pair inelegantly, at best, with "cafe," a typical Internet cafe is an unusual hybrid, something between a computer workstation and a hip West Coast fern bar.

It's both a real-time place for socializing and a platform to the much wider virtual community -- exactly the right words to pique Tokyo's internationally minded ego. Despite additional use fees, long waits to get to the machines and the fact that the lingua franca of the Net is English, customers come flocking -- often in pairs -- curious to see what the future and the Worldwide Web are all about.

"This is great," said a young man accessing L.L. Bean's mail-order homepage at Electronic Cafe, a California franchise which last June became the first cyber-coffee establishment in Japan. At another terminal a pair of ladies could be seen enjoying an animated "chat" with two men at the other end of the room -- communicating with keystrokes instead of eye contact and body language. At the six-floor Oz City in Jingumae, customers actually create their own "avatars" (animate personalities) and have them walk up to strangers in a graphic 3-D environment. The idea seems to be a hit among the Japanese, a society comfortable with masks and levels of separation.

Not only have Tokyoites gotten a virtual life, they are improving on it: Cafe des Pres in Hiroo and the Cafe Apollinaire in Roppongi are now online as the world's first Japanese cyber-Parisian cafes, and later this month a Thai-style cyber-food-dance hall will open in Shibuya.

But are Tokyo's latest addictions proof of a deepening cyberculture? Some signs suggest that the phenomenon so far remains superficial. A staffer at Electronic Cafe, for instance, when asked if customers could bring in their own programs or artwork on disks to share with others, replied: "Oh, that's not allowed, someone could bring in a virus."

Even for the burgeoning French cafes, the past winter has been a lean one, with competition and the cold thinning out customers. On a recent evening, for example, Cafe Apollinaire -- despite its computer terminal and heavy investment in brass railings -- was nearly empty, even as crowds ambled by in the rain. But will the espresso set come back with sunny skies and warm weather? For owners who've taken out rent on some of the city's busiest (and most expensive) acreage, it's imperative that they do.

But others never seem to worry about the seasons, the economy or anything else. Just as the trumpet fanfare from Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyrie" begins to crowd out all words, Lion's Ishihara sticks his head out from the kitchen window and declares: "I'd like to keep this place open as long as possible." And before ducking back in: "There's not one thing about it I'd like to change."

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