

Enoki

“Drunkards Alley” Story

Shibuya Nombeiyokocho

A collection of 41 tiny bars, most with their beginnings dating back almost 50 years located in Shibuya. Her bar, Enoki, is one of them in this network of narrow laneways, illuminated by red lanterns, just off the big commercial streets in Tokyo's Shibuya district.

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Copy right by Chizuru Doi

Preface

Shibuya Nombeiyokocho “Drunkards Alley” Story

It was the end of World War II and Japan started to rebuild. One of the buildings that first sprang up was one of these bars.

Then another was built along side the first and another and soon there were forty little tea houses lined up in two rows.

Times change and now beer, sake, wine and snacks are the only treats offered. A few of the tiny bars are still operated by their original operators. Most bars have changed hands many times.

There is usually enough room in each bar for the operator, "Mama-san," to stand behind her counter, serve food and drinks and banter with the six or so customers that have stopped in for a drink before going home. Because the bars usually seat about six only the Mamas have regular customers and will not easily accept customers that they don't know or are not escorted by a known customer, but don't let that discourage you. If you're in Tokyo visit Enoki and you with your good friends can stop in and talk nice to Chizuru-mama at Enoki with smile who will talk back nice to you.



ENOKI



Story of Enoki at Shibuya Nombeiyokocho “Drunkards Alley” – Story 1

Six nights a week, Chizuru Doi dishes out great food, good drink and sage advice in her tiny restaurant in Nombeiyokocho or “Drunkards Alley”.



Chizuru Doi

Her bar, Osakedokoro Enoki, is one of 41 in this network of narrow laneways, illuminated by red lanterns, just off the big commercial streets in Tokyo’s Shibuya district. She can accommodate eight people at a time on stools downstairs. An overflow crowd can climb the ladder-like steps to the attic but have to pick up their own food and drink.

“They call down, ‘Hey, mama, is it ready?’” says Akira Honda, a regular who acted as interpreter for me and my friend, a Vancouver food writer and broadcaster.

When we arrived around 7 p.m., only one man was seated in Doi’s tiny establishment. Other places were busy, and we were a little concerned. But by late evening, Doi’s place, which is open from 5 p.m. to midnight, has filled up: the company is good; the saki and shochu is flowing, and the bar food is superb.

In the background, Frank Sinatra sings. “She serves Japanese food, but she likes Western music, like jazz,” explains Honda, who works for a firm specializing in corporate investments.

During the evening two men from IBM are among the customers, as well as the president of a travel company. Two women drop by, one who works in public relations, and another who leafs through the program from British choreographer Matthew Bourne’s homoerotic version of Swan Lake, which had just opened in Tokyo.

Dressed in a black turtle neck sweater and red apron, her hair pulled back with an elastic, Doi can reach everything in her tiny space behind the bar by just turning around. Fresh produce and fish sit on ice on the counter. Glasses and plates are on shelves lining the wall.

She used to work for Japan’s biggest clothing manufacturers in the marketing department, but jumped ship 20 years ago to open her bar. “In the first years, I was an amateur,” says Doi, who’s now in her mid 50s, “but the numbers increased by word of mouth. I try to make every customer satisfied. ”There’s no menu; we trust her to choose.



Potato croquet



inside Enoki

First comes mackerel sashimi in a small salad with shiso leaf, the best the food writer had ever tasted. That was followed by a sizzling hot plate of potato croquet, made with Japanese mountain potatoes, a long tuber similar to a parsnip, garnished with bonito flakes and green onions.

Next, two rounds of a unique Enoki creation: lotus root and cheese. We shared the generous servings with Honda and others. The food writer was craving a tomato salad – produce in Japan looks luscious; it came with myoga, wild Japanese ginger.

After that: tasty and dainty New Zealand lamb chops grilled rare. The bill, which included saki and wine, came to 8,000 yen, or \$100 for two. One round of drinks was on the house; another, of a Japanese spirit called shochu, was offered by a regular from his own bottle, one of 32 stored flat on a shelf above the bar. Honda cautioned strangers about dropping into some of these bars, which were established in Shibuya in the early 1950s; you could get taken, he says. Most people come with a referral. “It’s important the first time,” he says.

An on-line guide to Tokyo describes the women proprietors of these bars, called mama-san, as “a unique breed who both charm and terrorize their customers, and who are less likely to rip you off if you speak some Japanese (but that’s no guarantee)”

If her place is filled, Doi recommends Torikuku Yakitori, a grilled chicken place, where people are lined up after 5 p.m., and a neighbouring bar called Nogawa.

Many of Doi’s clientele are working men who follow a common Japanese practice of not going home to their families for dinner. Nor would they think of bringing their spouses to Enoki. Two of them drop hints that they plan to savour heaven after they leave.

(Shibuya has a healthy share of love hotels, an often fanciful Japanese institution that caters to short-term stays, as well as overnights.) Many customers appear to treat Doi as mother confessor.

“She preaches to them, and sometimes people call and say thank you for the advice,” says Honda, a handsome man in his mid-40s with two teenage children. He has obviously shared some of his own heartache with mama-san.

Doi estimates she has built up a clientele of about 4,000. She shows off a cell phone photo of Sicily, where one of her customers has a house and she went for her vacation.

“The quality of clientele is very high,” says Honda. “It’s very quiet, very adult here..”

*Bars similar to those in Nonbei Yokocho are located elsewhere in Toyko. Shonben Yokocho, translated inelegantly as “Piss alley” and Golden Gai at the Shinjuku station, seem to cater to a younger crowd. At Yurakucho station, in Ginza, there’s Gadoshita, meaning under the tracks.



Article by
Ms. Ellen Moorhouse
The Tront Star

Story of Enoki at Shibuya Nombeiyokocho “Drunkards Alley” – Story 2

Leave the mad rush of Hachiko behind and enter Nombeiyokocho, a nugget of Old Tokyo that defines the fashions

Shibuya is a-changing. Recent commercial projects in the city are targeting a new, more sophisticated crowd in an effort to recapture the chic boutique-loving market that has been swamped by recession and the fast-food chains, game centers and teenagers with fake tans and high boots that followed in its wake.



A stone's throw from Shibuya Station

Yet, while the rest of Shibuya is buffeted by the economic tides and Tokyo's fickle trends, a small district in the hear of the city has barely batted an eyelid. Nombeiyokocho, or “Guzzler's Alley,” is a collection of 42 bars and a little nugget of old Japan that has survived Shibuya's high-rise development for almost half a century.

There’s no flash décor or concrete-and-glass sterility here, and although it is not the lost Japan that is occasionally glimpsed in the cultured and genteel tea houses of Kyoto, it is as representative of a bygone era as you will get in the capital.

Walk through the lantern-decorated archway that proudly announces this bar-lined entertainment district, which celebrates its 50th anniversary next year, and the space slackens. The mad rush of Hachiko crossing and the cacophony of sounds and the flash of neon seem a world away. Yet Nombeiyokocho maintains a boisterousness all of its own.

Each of the 42 bar-cum-eateries here would struggle to accommodate an elementary school volleyball team. But for Nombeiyokocho’s gregarious regulars, some of whom have been frequenting the district for many of its 49 years, size really doesn’t matter.

Formerly a popular site for yatai, or outdoor food stalls, Nombeiyokocho was established in 1949 as the result of a postwar U.S.-imposed prohibition on selling food on the streets. As Japan started to rebuild out of the ruins of World War II, its bars were some of the first buildings to appear in Shibuya.

As a consequence, Nombeiyokocho enjoys a somewhat prestigious location just minutes from Shibuya Station, which undoubtedly has contributed to its long-standing popularity as a one-for-the-road spot with Tokyo’s salaried workers.

While much of central Shibuya is now covered by high-rise buildings, Nombeiyokocho has resisted. Yet, its foundations are not so solid. As enviable as the location might seem, Nombeiyokocho is actually built on a stretch of the Shibuya River.

What's more, it's wedged into a tight spot next to the Yamanote Line railway tracks, making high-rise development near impossible.



Backyard of Nombeiyokocho

Once, Tokyo was dotted with similar types of drinking alleys. Today, however, only Nombeiyokocho, and one or two others, have survived.

One long-serving proprietor said the alley formerly occupied a larger area, until a developer acquired some of the land almost two decades ago. Proprietors then thought was the end.

“But we wanted to keep the area alive. We didn’t really know it then, but in retrospect, we were also salvaging a bit of Tokyo’s cultural heritage.”

Nombeiyokocho's original raison d'être is disputed. While some say the “bars” were originally nothing more than tea houses, others insist that some of the female proprietors offered, more intoxicating services that were shielded from view by a curtain that hung over the stairs leading to a tiny room on the second floor.

Asako Endo has been the “mama-san” at Taiko for the past 41 years and is, therefore, perhaps the most qualified to settle the argument. She insists Nombeiyokocho has always been a place for a drink, a chat and a laugh. “That’s one thing that hasn’t changed.”

But some things have changed at Nombeiyokocho. Enoki’s effervescent mama-san, Chizuru Doi, said that while the district has traditionally been a place for men to drink, more and more women are dropping by now.

“You could say (Nombeiyokocho) is a mirror of the times: At first it was men only, then during the bubble years, more women started working and some of their bosses brought them here after work,” Doi said. “Now they come on their own,” she said, laughing.

Says one Enoki customer, a Nombeiyokocho regular for 26 years; “When I first started coming here, it was almost taboo for women to go out drinking. Now, status isn’t important here.”

Enoki is possibly the most cosmopolitan of Nombeiyokocho's bars. An occasional overseas traveler herself, Doi welcomes foreign customers to her bars. She once even took on an American as an employee.

“These kinds of places are getting rarer and rarer, so in a sense they’re becoming more precious,” Doi says. “Foreign customers come here because they appreciate that. Some don’t want the antiseptic bars like Roppongi or Shinjuku. You can find those anywhere. For them, this is a little taste of old Japan.”



Not that Doi and company are likely to treat their customers to a full tea ceremony or serve their customers clothed in kimono. But Nombeiyokocho is a little universe of its own, with its own unwritten laws of conduct. You cross them at your peril.

A crowded Saturday evening, and Enoki is close to bursting point. Even the tiny six-tatami mat room upstairs has been taken over by a 12-strong group from a nearby office. But still the entrance doors slides open, and a face appears beneath the noren cloth that hangs over the entranceway and glances hopefully over the sale-sipping customers. Without saying a word, Doi looks toward a few guzzlers who, in her professional opinion, have had their money worth.

Doi says she feels bad turning people away. Consequently, on a busy night she insists on a two-hour time limit. “I don’t even have to tell regulars. There is a tacit understanding,” she said. If they’re not tuned into the same wavelength, she tells them: “Time’s up.”

Meanwhile, newcomers to come of the bars along the alley may get a chilly reception. As I stepped into one previously unvisited bar the conversation seemed to almost die.

All that was missing was for the mama-san to duck below the counter and a Clint Eastwood-type character materialize. Following right behind me, fortunately, was my drinking partner of the evening, a regular face around Nombeiyokocho.

Coming along with someone who’s already gotten their feet under the bar is often the safest solution, explains Kyoko Tamura, mama-san at Tamura. “Each place has its own personality, often dictated by the character of the owner, ” she says, “Some (proprietors) worry that a (newcomer) won’t feel comfortable.”

Doi agrees: “It’s for the benefit of both parties. My customers are all ‘tell it as it is’ types like me. A (new) customer might not like that. And we might not like the customer!”

Indeed, if you like straight talk and good-humored banter, then either of these two places are a good place to start at Nombeiyokocho. Doi doesn’t go much for b.s., so if you’re looking to be pampered, then you’ve come to the wrong place.

At Tamura, it's difficult not to feel instantly at home. But if things don't seem to be going smoothly, just try slipping something about northern Japan into your conversation. This will likely bring Tamura, a native of Akita Prefecture, scuttling to your side to perform a few songs of the country, crooned in the most unintelligibly thick dialect.

“She is a bit strange, don't you think?” laughs one customer. “Here, we're all a bit strange,” quips Tamura. It ain't exactly karaoke, but Nombeiyokocho has a unique variety of that, too.

Equipped with guitars and accordions, nagashi singers have been making the rounds of Nombeiyokocho for as long as its bars have existed. For a small fee, customers request a song and sing along with this dying breed of human karaoke.

In the past, the beverage and food selection at Nombeiyokocho was limited, though in recent years many of the places have responded to a demand for variety. Alongside the high-grade sake and shochu distilled spirits, Enoki now offers wine, ranging from Californian to Chilean. Doi-san also prepares an array of imaginative culinary dishes, conjured up on the single grill stove stashed away in the tiny space behind the bar.

Whether this change in food and drink culture has been responsible for the continued increase in female customers or vice-versa, it is certainly a consideration for the female clientele at Yasaiya, where the menu is vegetarian-only.

One office worker in her 20s explained that many of the female customers go to the bar simply for its food. “Sometimes you need a bit of a change and Yasaiya provides that in more than one sense.”

That just about sums up Nombeiyokocho: a bit of a change.



Inside Enoki



One step beyond



Article by Mr. Rob Gilhooly

Story of Enoki at Shibuya Nombeiyokocho “Drunkards Alley” – Story 3

Time-wrap Tokyo

Where some things are still what they used to be.

Our Japanese friend, Daisuke Utagawa, shepherds me and my wife, Melina, toward a massive intersection in the heart of Tokyo’s Shibuya district.

Rising above us is a neon smear – tangerine, red, yellow, purple – of flickering, pinwheeling signs stacked to the heavens, a gret wall of glowing brand names. We cross the car-thronged street against the pulsing river of pedestrians, then turn toward a darker lane.



Photo by Justin Guariglia

“Close your eyes,” Utagawa says, taking us each by the hand. We walk 20 paces. It is quieter here. The crowd has fallen away.

“You may open them now,” says, gesturing toward Nombeiyokocho, or “Drunkards’ Alley.” It is 300 yards long, lined with tiny wood-paneled restaurants, red lanterns glowing above their doors. “This place survived the development after World War II,” Utagawa says, “and hasn’t changed since.”

Old Tokyo, consumed by decades of growth, has been reduced to isolated remnants like this one. To find it, you have to know where to look. We step into Enoki, a tiny restaurant whose counter sits eight, packed thigh to thigh.

Article by Mr. Keith Bellow;

Keith is Editor in chief of TRAVELER, National Geographic, has been to Japan three times. “It’s compellingly enigmatic, ” he says.

Photograph by Mr. Justin Guariglia:

Justin is Contributing Editor - National Geographic Traveler, based in Singapore and Tokyo.

Adds: “Japan is the most foreign place you will find on this planet.”

Story of Enoki at Shibuya Nombeiyokocho “Drunkards Alley” – Story 4

Mama-san at Enoki

The name of the trade is that of being a mama-san, and indeed for many of the usually salaryman clientele across the nation seeking the solace of the bar she runs, her role is not unlike that of a surrogate mother.

There are of course as many different kinds of mama-san as there are watering holes that variously go under the name of ‘Snack’, ‘Snack Bar’ or ‘Pub’.



But the general image of the mama-san is the of a typically middle-aged woman who has managed to retain more than a suggestion of an attractive youth.

She presides over her place, stroking the vanities and soothing the ruffled egos of her male customer and making them feel for a while at one with themselves and the world.

The bar she runs forms for them an unharassed third apex in a triangular life that elsewhere embraces the more stressful points of office and home.

Chizuru Doi, who operates the small bar Enoki in an old-style area of Tokyo, is a little different to the perceived images of the occupation.

Probably like many women who end up doing this work, Chizuru (she prefers not to be called mama-san), who has been running Enoki for the past 17 years, originally had very different career goals.

“ I certainly never imagined myself doing this sort of things,” she calls. “Before I took over Enoki, I was working in fashion, but found myself getting a little tired of that world. Then a friend introduced me to Enoki and suggested I try my hand at running a bar.

I was a bit taken aback at first by the suggestion. But then I thought it over and decided I’d give it a try. I said I’d do it for a year and see how it all went. And, well, I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Her bar is located in the Nombeiyokocho (Drunkyards’ Alley) area of Shibuya. Just a couple of minutes away from the huge station, Nombeiyokocho is positioned physically between the two

contrasting worlds of the bright lights and bright youth of Shibuya's main junction and the park running parallel to the Yamanote Line, where the homeless sleep in their small cardboard forts.

The area is a bit of a time trap in modern Tokyo, a throwback to the days of the Occupation, when it, like the bigger and better-known Golden Gai in Shinjuku, was established.

Even back in 1985, it seemed curiously out of place, as Chizuru comments: “I never knew then that such places still existed in Tokyo. It was an area that had kept more or less unchanged since the early postwar years, and it seemed rather dark and a little scary.

It was a place where people came just to drink. But then I got to know the customers at Enoki, and they all seemed like rather nice people.

Drinking places do not come much smaller than Enoki. The main bar has room for just eight customers, sitting in an L-shaped area around the counter.

Though for the customer the business of sitting in Enoki and knocking back the beers is not too strenuous, that of running even such a small place can be fairly demanding.

Enoki is open from 5:00 p.m. until midnight every day except Sunday, and Chizuru's day is not short: “I get here at around 2:00 or 2:30 in the afternoon, then I go shopping for the food.

I have to clean up, and that takes longer than you'd think. The first customer often arrives on the dot at 5:00, but he knows that then all he can get is a drink because I'm usually still preparing the food.

I work right through midnight. But then after I've closed, I've got to clear up and so don't usually get home until about 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. With such a small establishment as Enoki, the mechanics of circulating the customers is more important than in bigger bars.

“Enoki soon fills up, and so it's good if there are two or three shifts of customers in an evening,” Chizuru explains. “That's the best for me in terms of business and also makes for a more interesting mix of clientele.

As well , it's not good for customers to spend too much time lingering here since they've usually got to get up for work the next day. If I think they've been here too long, I tell them they ought to head off home.”

Whatever the skills may be in running a bar, Chizuru would seem to have them: a point of pride with here is that during the time that she has been the owner of Enoki, she has never once gone in the red, even though most of this time has been during Japan's economic malaise of the post-'Bubble' era.

As you would expect, an important element in running a bar of this kind is keeping the customer happy, of presenting a cheerful face and manner. That is not the easiest of tasks, as Chizuru relates:

“It’s no problem being all smiles at the start of the evening because you’ve just arrived and have the work in front of you.

But it gets harder towards the end. Still, I’ve been doing this for 17 years, so I’ve learned how to deal with it. If I have to tell a customer off – and it’s part of my job that I do do that – I always make sure I give them a nice smile afterwards.”

Not infrequently, Chizuru has to listen with a psychiatrist’s patience to the problems and woes of her of her clientele: “Sometimes if I’m here with just one other customer – it may not even be someone I know so well – he’ll suddenly open up his hear to me and tell me his closest secrets.

People tell me things they’d never tell their wives or girlfriends and swear me to secrecy. I’ve never been married, but if I hear about some problems in a relationship and see that the particular customer has been acting out of line, I give them a piece of my mind and tell them they need to change their ways.”

Though Chizuru never intended to be a mama-san, she is now more than content with her lot and, she admits, right now she could not countenance any other life.

And just as many of her clients may see in her the surrogate mother – or wife of girlfriend or bid sister – the relationship works two ways. “For me,” she says simply, “my customers are just like my family.”

Article by Mr. Bill Willias

Enoki

“Drunkards Alley” story
Shibuya Nombeiyokocho
A small universe in Tokyo

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