

Café and Coffee Shop Tours in Kyoto #2

There is a traditional Japanese coffee shop along the Takase River. Called “Salon de thé François,” it was the first coffee shop/café to be listed as a National Tangible Cultural Property (registered in 2003). Its stained-glass windows are positioned to allow sunshine to filter through them, so colored light cascades beautifully onto the white walls inside, as if inviting people in.

* Prices in this article include tax



The cake and coffee/tea set is 1,350 yen (pictured: no-bake cheesecake set). A coffee/tea set featuring a special caramel pudding topped with orange confiture (à la carte price: 900 yen) is also available for 1,550 yen.

The Salon de thé François was founded by Shoichi Tateno, an aspiring painter. He opened the café in 1934 as a place where people could freely discuss their thoughts and art. The shop’s design and engineering were by Alessandro Bencivenni, an Italian student studying at Kyoto Imperial University (later renamed Kyoto University), and Japanese painters. Shoichi named the shop after Jean-François Millet, his favorite painter.

Once inside, you are immediately led into the north wing of the building, which was renovated in 1941 to evoke the interior of an Italian luxury liner.

The design from that era remains largely preserved. A collection of paintings is displayed inside the shop, including a limited reproduction of the “Mona Lisa” and “The Seine Riverside,” painted in Paris by the artist Kenzo Itani for the café. Along with a ceramic owl on the wall, they have quietly witnessed the café’s history since its founding. Seating capacity totals 80 seats (at tables) across both the original



south wing and the north wing.

The Salon de thé François was passed down from the founding couple to their second daughter, Kayoko Imai (President and Representative Director). Now, Hikaru Kondo (Director), Kayoko’s eldest daughter, leads the shop’s management. “Shoichi was a stylish person. He was short-tempered, but he was always a gentle, loving grandpa to me,” she recalls.

A commercial establishment serving as a space where people could enjoy coffee while listening to Western classical music was remarkable in those days, particularly during the mid- and post-war periods, when freedom of speech was restricted. Anti-war activists frequented the shop, and the couple supported their cause. Even today, the shop attracts a diverse group of people, including painters, scholars, and those involved in the film and theater industries. It is not rare to find celebrities among customers.

Some customers, their eyes sparkling, say they have returned after 40 years, and Hikaru relates to their feeling, saying, “I think the unchanged atmosphere makes them emotional.” Recently, many tourists have been visiting the shop. As a coffee shop manager, she sticks to the basics. She is never happier than when she sees the aroma of coffee soothe away customers’ stress and lift their spirits, allowing them to enjoy the simple pleasure of savoring their coffee.

People’s preferences for coffee flavor vary greatly, particularly today, when tastes have become increasingly refined and sophisticated. For this reason, she focuses on the “traditional flavor,” while fine-tuning it to meet the best standards of today. The same can apply to baking cakes. The shop’s method is straightforward, using carefully selected ingredients to achieve a simple, rustic taste.

The cake set is one of the most popular menu items (1,350 yen), and of these, the no-bake cheesecake made with Danish cream cheese and blueberry sauce is a top choice. Both coffee and tea (à la carte price: 700 yen) pair well with the cakes.

Another charm of the café is how the view changes depending on where you sit. The shop’s ambiance also changes according to the time of day. You can enjoy quiet relaxation in the morning and during lunch hours, while in the afternoon teatime, the shop is enveloped in a pleasant hum of conversation.

Of course, the shop’s long history has a drawback: when one thing is repaired, another soon needs attention. Hikaru says, however, that she believes this is part of preserving the shop’s character. She then adds, “A coffee shop is not simply a place to serve drinks. My motto is always to be prepared to maintain a clean and comfortable space for customers.

I’m fortunate because I have foundations laid by my grandparents and mother, as well as the support of customers and staff. I believe the vibrant lives of the people who gather here, our customers and staff, give the shop its energy and allow it to continue.”



Salon de thé François

Shijo-sagaru, Nishi-Kiyacho-Dori, Shimogyo-ku, Kyoto City
TEL: 075-351-4042

Website: <https://francois1934.com/>

- Open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. (last order: 8:00 p.m. for meals/9:30 p.m. for drinks and desserts)
- Open year-round except for the following days: December 31, January 1-2
- Located right by Exit 1-B at Kyoto-kawaramachi Station, Hankyu Railway

