

[Back to Ben's Café page](#)



Drawing: **Maya** (see "Arty Stuff")

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Designer coffee at Ben's

Ben is no longer at the new style café he started back in the mid-1990s in Tokyo. He returned to New York leaving Yoshiko Toyama in charge. The last time I was there in 2008 it was still different, still humming, still a great place to visit. The café that Ben started was a solid monument to the coffee-house conversation and comradely

atmosphere the he believed in. Yoshiko kept the café in Ben's name.

Ben Watson created a New York-style café off the beaten track in Takadanobaba, a suburb of Tokyo and a thriving student area. That was in 1996 and Ben quickly established himself and his ideas as the features of the café. He knew how to welcome *gaijin*, firing off a friendly rejoinder, making a quick joke – with small talk and a ready welcome he was

clearly keen on serving his many customers well. When we asked once for a spot more wine in our glass – Tokyo restaurants and bars measure hopelessly inadequate half-full glasses – he came up with the idea of a bigger glass!

For Ben this café was a far cry from his immediate past. Tall, fine looking and eagle-eyed, Ben had worked in New York selling coffee before travelling to Tibet. That inspired him to export goods to Japan - rugs, leather stuff, ornaments, prayer wheels and other spiritual accoutrements. He did well enough to set up the café in 1995. He enjoyed recounting those days and chatting about anything else that made pleasing conversation.

Ben's Coffee

Going to his café was an adventure. At that time it was the only foreign-owned café in Japan. Now there are many more *gaijin* entrepreneurs. The thing that Ben hotly promoted was the quality of the coffee – he termed it “a coffee-drinking experience”, and enthusiastically explained in some detail how he got the best machine, the richest coffee and the surest way to generate the satisfaction of his customers. Ben's did not serve “Futsu no kohee” (regular coffee), “hotto” (hot water with Instant), “blendo” (blend coffee), the usual simple watery coffee made by a drip method. That used to be all that was available in Tokyo, easy to order, quick to serve. So some reeducating was necessary to persuade customers that espresso-based coffees were worth the extra time and cash. The '90s saw a move towards a more Continental taste in coffee, the richer and tastier the better. Ben made the right decision to go espresso! He explained that his silver Italian coffee-machine's nine atmospheres of pressure extract richer coffee oils. However, he liked to believe that people also visited for his “designer coffee”. He loved taking the care to put a pattern on the surface of the lattes, a leaf or a simple flower – at that time a novelty.

New York style

It wasn't just the full-taste cappuccinos or mochas or espresso shots, it was the New York-style open design of the café. It was possible to stay all day – many people seemed to do just that on a Sunday – sipping, reading, chatting, playing board games or just taking in the atmosphere. It could have been a Paris Left Bank café Tokyo-style with its narrow pavement and street frontage buildings crowding in on top of you. In fact, right above Ben's were six floors of tiny offices.

Ben certainly created something different to the usual *kissaten*, the old-style Japanese coffee shop with soft seats and round tables, and a *mama-san* in a kimono. It was also a far cry from the popular stand-up coffee bars with slick service and plastic-wrapped slices of cake. He created a meeting place, almost a home from home, and both Japanese and foreign clientele loved it. The news spread *kuchikomi*, by word of mouth.

When he was asked about the competition that had sprung up all around for good coffee and trendy cafés, such as Starbucks, he said confidently he was not worried. Starbucks was more of a fast-food concept, and it was operated in Japan by Sazebys, a Japanese company. Ben's Café was wholly owned and operated by Ben! And it was a real café, very individualistic, no need to keep in line with the uniformity of a franchise operation.

Food

There was a menu, too! Ben's food and coffee attracted several hundred customers a day. Not bad for a back-street café more than 7 minutes walk from a station. One of the many points that differentiated Ben's from fast-food outlets was the real cups and glasses, rather than throw-away utensils. Still, it was a café, not a restaurant, so the menu was limited - fresh soups, salads and bagels. What else would it be since it was a New York café? Ben's was quite an attraction for people wanting a coffee or a drink after eating at one of Takadanobaba's many good restaurants. Ben's regularly stayed open until after midnight.

People came not just for the excellent coffee, soft drinks, beers and wines. They came for the atmosphere and the chance to meet interesting people. The café was open-plan, no partitions or cubicles cutting customers off. It was easy to strike up conversation. Ben created a place to linger, a place for savouring.

Highly recommended at Ben's now on weekdays are the set lunch menus from ¥1000. The homemade quiche is popular. At weekends there's English breakfast, Caesar salad and various breads and pancakes.

Magazines, books, etc.

You could read up-to-date magazines and newspapers – The Economist, Vanity Fair, Forbes, Fortune, Food&Wine, Tokyo Day and Night, The Japan Times and The Yomiuri. There were good books, an assortment of dictionaries, Learn Japanese books,

guide books to Tokyo and Japan, The Traveller's Handbook. There was Scrabble, chess, draughts, backgammon and, of course, *Go*. There was even a computer for customer use, possibly a forerunner of the popular Internet Cafes, where people can stay all night if they wish or if they have nowhere else to go.

If you tired of sitting sipping coffee and chatting about life in Tokyo, you could read the packed noticeboard: Shiatsu massage, 3,000 yen; "I want piano lessons"; Fortune Readings by Ray for ¥1,500; Japanese lessons ¥2,500 an hour; "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" – a workshop in creativity; English or German lessons; *Franc-Parler* – a bilingual French/Japanese newspaper; English bookshops; Buy a Ben's T-shirt; news of a host of events and concerts; Anyone want an airline ticket to Vancouver?

Lots of Diversions

In the first few years Ben was happy to incorporate just about anything that people wanted in a café to make it eclectic and interesting. So there were the exhibitions, the computer, the games, the books, the events. And there were massages and tattoos! On a Friday night you could have a massage from a Japanese woman who wandered around the café looking very professional in a white lab coat. She would give a fine shoulder and head massage for ¥1000 if you so desired. The same woman did henna tattoos on a Saturday afternoon. In a land where tattoos are generally taboo because they are a mark of *yakuza* (gangsters), this was definitely different and daring.

Poetry Readings

Held on two Sunday nights a month were very popular poetry readings, one organised by a Japanese poetry group and the other by an American man. This kind of thing was reminiscent of the Paris bookshop "Shakespeare and Company" on the Left Bank, which gave many literary greats, including Joyce and Hemingway, the opportunity to read their stuff. Perhaps Ben's will produce literary luminaries of a similar calibre.

Ben insisted on few conditions for the readings; anyone who wanted could have a go. He provided a small stage, a curtain, a spotlight and a microphone, not forgetting the free venue. There was a mix of poems, some in Japanese and some in other languages to keep the international audience happy.

The night I went there must have been fifty people enjoying the spontaneity and drama of it all. A few glasses of Ben's excellent wine or Continental beers helped, of course.

After a 25-minute documentary about the café on NHK (Japan's BBC), the popularity of the readings increased.

Ben had quite strong views about the documentary. The filming took a week, looking at many aspects of the café, but in the end the thrust of the programme was the poetry reading, "for some weird reason" making the evening out to be a chance for the poets (and audience?) to relieve their loneliness. Ben thought this focus rather odd because both readings and readers were vibrant and interesting, not at all the image the documentary portrayed. He was typically amused by the number of new people who visited in the weeks after the programme, asking at the café how to get help in their lives. A wry sense of humour came to the fore as Ben recalled that one of the poets had been a black New Yorker who performed dramatic jazz poetry, telling the audience that jazz culture was not about money, but about getting closer to god. Ben said it was great to think of his café as a place to get closer to heaven.

Arty Stuff



Art and Chat

Some of the artwork at Ben's Café was indeed celestial. There were always exhibitions of paintings, usually for two weeks, booked well in advance. The paintings were mostly by local artists – eclectic would be the word to describe them; pop art, wall vases, portraits, instamatic camera photos, cartoons and a

multi-media show about the Yamanote Line (Tokyo's Circle Line). Some exhibitions were from further afield –

watercolours of life in the South of France. Some of the artists were interesting, too. For example, Kiki, the All – Europe pro-wrestling champion exhibited oil paintings while she also worked as bodyguard for pro-wrestler Fujiwara Fumicho. Another evening performance combined art and music in a high camp style. Over seventy people turned up to see a young Japanese man doing calligraphy on big white cards with giant strokes of a brush, all to the beat of raunchy music. His name was Maya, a woman's name and he wore

women's clothes, as he put it "to bring out the true spirit of shodo" (calligraphy). Two young women in skimpy white dresses introduced him in his boas and he started the show by painting on their dresses. Little wonder the café was packed!

Yoshiko, Ben's present owner, continues to support local artists and performers. She says she wants Ben's to be a place where people can gather, show their work and discuss all kinds of things.

Wine Tastings



"We're having a good time."

Of course, as a wine lover, I am biased but Ben's tastings were special in their simplicity - not for experts or connoisseurs - just for you and me. An invited wine expert, usually a dealer, hosted the evening and supplied the vino. It was a great chance to taste 6 glasses of the same kind of wine, a Chardonnay, Merlot or Sauvignon Blanc, and to try to guess what country they were from.

In the beginning there was just cheese and bread with the wine. As the tastings grew in popularity they became more lavish; small delicious dishes would be provided to complement each wine. Perhaps it was better in the early days, certainly cheaper at ¥3,000 per person. I learned from a fellow wine-taster, who claimed to have attended over 20 of these tastings, that they stopped in 2006 because they had become unmanageable. They had become too complex requiring more staff and training, and the space was not big enough to move around in. Nothing to do with the popularity, of course.

NO SMOKING! area

Ben was one of the first to introduce a No-Smoking section in a Tokyo eatery. Typically tolerant he also put in a hi-tech air purifier to dispel tobacco fumes. However, he made no judgments about smokers – true to the coffee-house spirit. One solution was to sit outside. Big bi-fold doors opened up to create a fine indoor-outdoor flow in the steaming

hot summer from May to September. Twenty people could sit at outside tables protected from the hum of the street by ornamental bushes.

Customers, waiters

An example of the kind of customer that enjoyed Ben's was Bob Thornton, a teacher at a nearby national university. He said, "There are two drinking places in Tokyo where the owner remembers my name. One is the Irish bar in Takadanobaba, "The Fiddler", the other is Ben's! Then there was Todd, an American preacher and wedding celebrant. He usually came to Ben's after work, tired and thirsty – when I interviewed him he had done 5 weddings and was badly in need of a coffee. One Japanese customer had been coming with his staff from his architectural office ever since Ben's opened for business – he had been nicknamed Café Latte-san!

Many *kikoshijo* (Japanese returnees after living overseas) worked at Ben's. You got the feeling they were culturally elsewhere – Vancouver, San Francisco, London – and did not really align with Japan's straight lines now, but they were happy serving and speaking in fluent English with customers.

Mercedes

I asked Ben to imagine he was able to afford a car and if a parking space were available for rent near his café, what kind of car would it be. Of course, a Merc! Or "Benz" as they're called in Japan. Maybe his next café should be called Mercedes.

It was October, '08 when I last went to Ben's. It was busy. Yoshiko was at the counter and welcomed me like a long lost friend. I said the café looked as if it was doing well. She said things were all right, she had successfully started film evenings, showing old Japanese movies. "We miss Ben, though," she confessed. Ben seemed to be doing all right in New York again. Personally I would not be surprised to hear next time I visit that he was back in Tibet.

Ben's Café: 1-29-21, Takadanobaba, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo.

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www.benscafe.com

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For up-to-date information on the Menu, Features, Events, Art, Photos, and How to get there:

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