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By Tom Downey
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A Manhattan in Tokyo

IN JAPAN, A BARTENDER
CAN ELEVATE A COCKTAIL
TO A REVELATION

THANKS TO READING JAPANESE novelist (and former bar owner) Haruki Murakami, I fell in love with the idea of cocktails long after I'd started drinking them. The main character in Murakami's *South of the Border, West of the Sun* is a bar owner who describes his occupation as mystical. His bars are shrines to solo drinkers who don't want to drink alone. When I first read Murakami, I imagined that the bars he described were, just as he wrote, "castles in the air." Then I traveled to Japan.

It was 2004, and I was visiting a friend in a small city near the Sea of Japan called Kanazawa. I had passed through Tokyo before, but this was my first experience outside of the capital and the first time I'd be spending any real length of time in the country. As I walked down a narrow alleyway on a cold night, I saw a man step out of a tiny establishment tucked between two taller buildings, and behind him I caught a glimpse of warm lighting bouncing off shiny glasses. A few quiet notes of Chet Baker accompanied the telltale rhythm of a cocktail shaker. I stepped inside.

There were just ten seats, most arranged around the bar, which was presided over by a lone bartender. Fortunately, English is the international language of cocktails, so I asked for a manhattan, straight up. With precise movements, he placed bottles of rye, vermouth, and bitters before me and proceeded to mix the best manhattan I'd ever had. I returned to this pocket-size bar a few more times before I left the city,



and on each visit, as I sampled a different, sublime version of a cocktail standard, I wondered if I had found the one and only bar in Japan that lived up to Murakami's ideal—and my new benchmark.

I told the bartender that I was heading to Osaka the next day, and he referred me to Bar K. The bartender there liked to make the once-classic-but-now-forgotten drinks of Hemingway's Havana watering hole, La Floridita. Each of his renditions was a masterpiece. The bartender at Bar K sent me to a great place in Fukuoka, where I watched master mixologist Aoyama Takahiro stand behind a narrowly focused spotlight that shined on his cocktails. My visits to bars all over Japan eventually made it clear to me that Murakami's ideal bars—Christ, any man's ideal bars—did exist. They were all in Japan.

SAMURAI SATIATION
At Tokyo's Moruume, in the
Futakotamagawa district, bartender
Takashi Makishima presents another
spirited work of art.

The Japanese bars I love are small, with only ten or 12 seats and one man, the bartender (ordinarily the owner), who runs the show and creates the experience. The soundtrack is usually jazz standards heard over a meticulously designed stereo installation that intrigues the ear but doesn't overpower the space. Patrons sit down to drink, or wait outside for an open seat—no standing allowed. The lighting is always just strong enough so you can see a companion but dark enough to let you disappear into the pleasure of the first sip.

A Japanese bartender takes exquisite pride in his creations. He places the raw ingredients before a customer and then begins the chemistry: crushing ice, pounding sugar, trimming fruit, mixing liquids, and finally producing a cocktail that's like nothing you've ever had. Ask for a Scotch on the rocks, and he'll hand-carve a sphere of ice to fit snugly inside a low-ball glass. He'll have a few bottles of hard-to-find treasures like Tanqueray Malacca gin (no longer available) stashed away for special requests.

In New York, the bartender, following some hail-fellow-well-met model, serves a drink and makes conversation. In contrast, the Japanese craftsman forges his relationships with customers through his drinks, showing an obsessive knowledge of obscure recipes and using rare ingredients and long-forgotten methods to create extraordinary cocktails.

To me, the ultimate test of a cocktail bar is whether I feel comfortable drinking by myself. In most American bars, drinking alone feels pathetic, even pathological. But the cocktail bars of Japan are the perfect places to sip a brisk Manhattan all by yourself, take in a little Louis Armstrong, and simply enjoy the experience of good liquor transformed into something spectacular.

On my last visit to Japan, after crisscrossing the country by rail, I returned to Tokyo, where I stumbled upon Maruume, a small, carefully designed, discreet bar in the Futakotamagawa district. There are some places in the world that you can't pass by, that draw you inside with the promise of an unknown but sweet return.

I pushed aside a curtain, slid open the wooden door at the entrance, and immediately noticed the bar itself. It was made from one whole slice of a pine tree, with polished bark forming the counter's edge. Bartender Takashi Makishima told me his specialty was fruit cocktails. I asked him for his favorite: a rum drink made with kiwi, grapefruit juice, and a dash of Calpis, a Japanese milk-flavored soft drink (see recipe). Sipping the concoction, listening to the jazz softly playing in the background, and savoring the bar's intricate yet subdued lighting, I realized that as beautifully as Murakami describes the subtle allure of the Japanese cocktail experience in his novels, the real pleasure is in the sipping. ☺

MARUUME'S FRESH KIWI COCKTAIL

- > 1 ripe kiwi
- > 1 oz. white rum
- > ½ oz. kiwi liqueur
- > 1 oz. grapefruit juice
- > ¼ oz. Calpis

- 1 Peel the kiwi and place it in a Boston shaker.
- 2 After smashing the kiwi with a pestle, add the remaining ingredients and a handful of ice. Shake.
- 3 Strain and serve straight up in a cocktail glass.

Belly Up to Japan

Bar K
1F Koyo Bldg.
1-3-3 Sonezakishinchi
Osaka
011-81-6-6343-1167

Kuroyoshi
La Corte Daimyo 7F
1-3-32 Daimyo, Chuoku
Fukuoka
011-81-9-2726-9405

Maruume
3-11-4 Tamagawa
Setagaya-ku
Tokyo
011-81-3-5716-9981

Nakamura
1-6-6 Katamachi
Kanazawa
011-81-7-6263-3838



"Sometimes my bars feel like imaginary places I created in my mind. Castles in the air."

—HARUKI MURAKAMI,
SOUTH OF THE BORDER,
WEST OF THE SUN



LIQUID REALITY
Maruume's well-stocked shelves, sublime drinks, and manicured interior combine to create an almost otherworldly cocktail experience.