



Food and drink

History on a plate

Love cafés but tired of the same old? This former sento will reawaken your imagination.

Text: Carla Avolio Images: KS

Finding a truly unique café can be difficult these days. So many have the mass-produced comfort of the Starbucks/Hollies franchises, or are intentionally sterile with hard seating to ensure a fast customer turnover.

That's why I love Sarasa Nishijin – a Kyoto café that's been cleverly installed into the shell of a grand 1930s Japanese bathhouse, or *sento*. The original structure and interior features have been reworked to great effect, resulting in a unique establishment that's visually stunning and steeped in history.

The first thing you notice about Sarasa Nishijin is the magnificent wooden building, which is located on a quiet street about 10 minutes from Kuramaguchi Station. The wide, two-story structure is in its original form and features the decorative curved roof characteristic of Buddhist temples and used as an architectural element in many traditional sento. Inside, however, is the real revelation. The front section, which would have been the old bathhouse changing rooms, has been converted to an airy space of dark wood set against cream walls, made cosy with bookshelves and a mix of comfortable couches, small tables and chairs.

Beyond this and up four steps is the café's *piece de resistance* – the striking room where bathing and showering would have taken place. The walls of this cavernous space are lined with floor-to-ceiling antique majolica tiles, whose floral and geometric patterns in pink, blue, green and cream create a visual feast. Many bathhouse original features have been blended into the café décor, including mirrors, large tiled basins and grandfather clocks. A big chunk of the wall that would have separated male and female bathers has also been retained, and there are still marks in the tiles showing where taps were inserted for showering.

There's no denying the atmosphere created by these lingering memories. Over a mug of hot tea, one can almost hear the chatter of women, the cry of babies, and the splash of water in thick, steam-filled air.

The sento theme doesn't extend further than the café's design. Besides the *onsen tamago* served atop spaghetti carbonara, the menu has no particular focus – ranging from omelettes, salads and rice dishes for starters to a steak-heavy selection in the mains. Curiously, vegans are catered for with a separate menu of green salad,

Okinawa noodles and *donburi*. There's also a reasonable lunch or homemade cake set, both for ¥900. The drinks menu comprises a small range of spirits, homemade sangria and strange beer cocktails (Kahlua and beer, perhaps?).

But that's no matter; cocktails in whatever form are sure to go down a treat at the live music events that Sarasa Nishijin hosts twice a month. At these informal gigs, regulars say the acoustic sounds reverberate beautifully off the venue's high ceilings and tiled walls.

A funky café imbued with life from a bygone era – history doesn't get much tastier than this.

Café Sarasa Nishijin

- **Where:** 1-1-1 Murasakino Higashi-fujinomori-cho, Kita Ward, Kyoto, 603-8223
- **Tel:** 075-432-5075
- **Open:** 12-11pm; lunch 12-3pm; dinner 6-10pm

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