Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

Continuing Japan's Traditional Culture: Gateway to the Tea Ceremony ---Trial lesson at Salon---

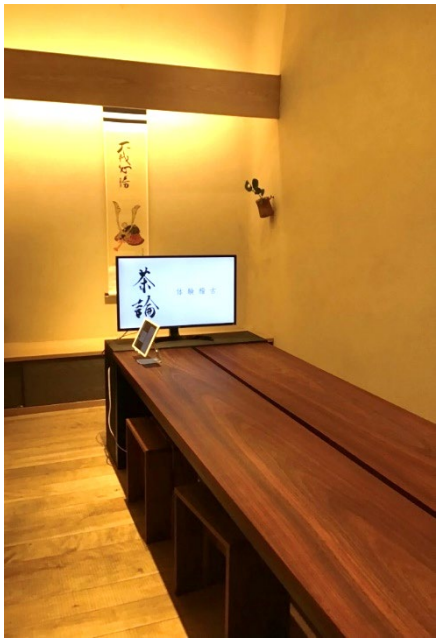
What do you imagine when you think of tea ceremony classrooms? Especially for beginners, they may appear rather formidable places. The lessons look difficult; it must be hard sitting on your heels for a long time; perhaps you have wanted to try but did not know where to go. In the past newcomers basically needed an introduction to join, so it is no wonder that beginners feel overawed. And in this busy day and age, maybe it is also difficult to set aside a fixed hour every week for lessons.

At the Salon shops, however, it is possible to study the tea ceremony casually while using proper utensils at the same time. The shops are conveniently located in commercial facilities near railway stations, and you can make reservations online and visit at your own pace to fit in with your commuting or shopping. I went along to the Salon Nihombashi shop inside Nihombashi Takashimaya S.C. in Tokyo for a trial lesson and a talk with its manager, Ms. Nozomi Watanuki.

The Salon shops were established by the Nakagawa Masashichi Shoten Group, which was founded in Nara in 1716 and has the vision of "Revitalizing Japanese craft." Proposing ways of enjoying the tea ceremony suited to modern times, they have introduced a brand that lowers the threshold for the tea ceremony culture, which tends to be somewhat aloof. At present there are four Salon shops in Tokyo, Osaka, Yokohama, and Nara.

Original System Overturns Traditional Image

Because the system is so easy to understand, enabling people to make reservations online and continue at their own pace, even complete beginners will feel like giving it a try. Until now beginners who have wanted to start learning the tea ceremony have faced many difficult obstacles, such as where to go and how the various schools differ in terms of etiquette and instruction. They have tended to feel somewhat daunted. At the Salon shops, however, there is no such stiffness. Visitors can study the tea ceremony as a pleasure and as a part of their daily lives, learning in a balanced manner about the spirit of hospitality, the model of etiquette, tea making, and so on, and knowledge relating to the history and rules of the tea ceremony. In addition, the Salon shops skillfully make use of modern technology. As well as the in-shop lessons, students can watch videos repeatedly online, enabling them to prepare for and review classes. "The rich tea ceremony connects with various forms of Japanese culture," commented Ms. Watanuki, "but unfortunately the number of people learning the tea ceremony these days is on the decline. That is why we introduced this new system, which is more suited to the times."



Trial Lesson

The practice area was located behind a *noren* curtain at the back of the shop. The first thing that surprised me was that the space did not have tatami mats but a table and chairs. "We want people to feel at ease upon arriving at the gateway to tea ceremony culture and entering the world of the tea ceremony," explained Ms. Watanuki, "That is why we have this table-and-chair environment. Most of the time people wear Western clothes and live and work in Western-style rooms, so we are proposing this new way of enjoying the tea ceremony by beginning to learn casually in familiar surroundings."

The practice area, with its wide table, has a relaxing atmosphere, and the hanging scroll, flower arrangement, and decoration are changed seasonally. “The tea ceremony is not only about enjoying the taste of tea,” said Ms. Watanuki. “It includes the decoration and everything. This hospitality, including the atmosphere of the place, is tea ceremony culture.”

The 90-minute trial lesson consisted of an experience of tea ceremony hospitality demonstrated by an instructor and a lecture on tea ceremony history. First, to calm me down, I was served a cup of hot water with floating perilla. At proper tea gatherings, such hot-water drinks are served to guests before they enter the tea ceremony proper to moisten their throats.

Hot water with floating perilla and main sweet (*omogashi*)

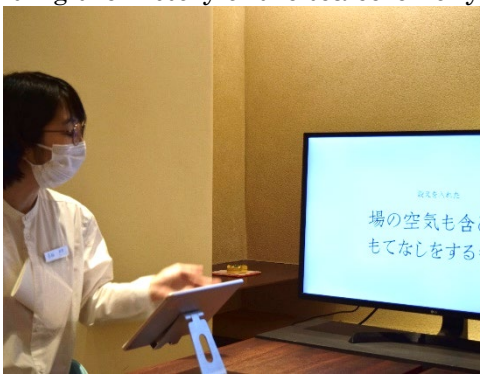
Hospitality by the Instructor

The trial lesson began with a demonstration of tea making by the instructor. There was a box with tea-making utensils on the table, and the instructor proceeded to make tea without any wasted time, maintaining a beautiful posture throughout.

I savored the tea made by the instructor together with seasonal Japanese confectionery procured from the Kashiya traditional sweet shop in Nara. The confectionery is changed twice a month and, like the decoration, gives a sense of the season. In the actual lessons as well, students can enjoy the seasonal tea, sweets, and decoration, which are changed every month. On this occasion, the tea bowl was black, and the green color of the matcha shone beautifully. I fully savored this first bowl of tea in the trial lesson with all five senses.

Learning about the Tea Ceremony

After the tea-making demonstration, I received a lecture using slides and learned about how this unique culture had developed, including the history of the tea ceremony in Japan and cultural aspects. The content of the lecture was easy to understand even for a beginner. I learned about the aesthetic concept of *wabi* (beauty in simplicity), the development of various forms of Japanese culture in the Muromachi period (1333–1568) and their interaction, the life of the tea master Sen no



Rikyu (1522–91), and establishment of the tea ceremony. Even just through this trial lesson, names, words, and various knowledge about the tea ceremony that I had known superficially beforehand came together, and I was able to understand how our present image of the tea ceremony has taken shape through history.

Practice

After the lecture, I learned how to handle and hold the whisk, the amount of tea, and the temperature and quantity of hot water, and then I made tea myself. As I received advice about such matters as how to hold the tea bowl down, posture, and whisking, it was quite easy to understand. I was also told about the differences between the various tea ceremony schools, so my general knowledge about the tea ceremony increased as well. I sipped the tea that I had made myself together with dry sweets. The first time I had simply enjoyed the tea, but the second time I learned about the way of drinking, manners, and their meaning too. After I had finished my bowl of tea, the trial lesson ended.

Dry sweets carefully produced by Kashiya

As well as this lesson area, Salon has a tearoom serving Japanese confectionery and tea and a shop selling original tea utensils. In the tearoom, as well as enjoying tea made by the staff and sweets, customers can have a simple tea ceremony experience as well. And while utilitarian, the utensils on sale in the shop are simple and perfectly suited to our modern lifestyle. Even without a tea ceremony room at home, you can

realize a lifestyle for enjoying the tea ceremony in your daily life.

Salon offers these 90-minute trial lessons for first-time visitors. Then, if you want to continue learning, there are elementary, intermediate, and advanced courses. (Each course consists of a total of six 60-minutes lessons.) A ticket system is used, and reservations can be made online up to two hours prior to the start of the lesson. Salon's tea ceremony classes really are abreast of the times!

Conversation with Ms. Watanuki, Manager of Salon Nihombashi and My Instructor in the Trial Lesson

Q: What are Salon's unique points compared with other tea ceremony classes?
A: First, our table-and-chair environment is different. Second, instead of a master, we have instructors who convey the attractions of the tea ceremony in an enjoyable manner. And third, we have systematized the study of tea. Our lessons have a dual structure. Before practice, students watch a video to obtain knowledge. In other tea ceremony classes, usually you cannot take photos or notes. But here, to entrench the knowledge, we permit students to watch the video, freely take notes during the lessons, and photograph the decoration and so on. Some students enjoy taking photos of the confectionery every month!

Q: Why did you think of introducing a system that makes it so easy for even beginners to start?

A: We wanted more people to encounter the attractions of the tea ceremony, and we began with the idea of enabling people to study more casually, acquiring techniques beyond the framework of schools and enjoying learning about the tea ceremony's history.

Q: Do any foreigners come to practice tea ceremony here?
A: Since we are unable to respond in English, we do not have any completely foreign-language courses. But some international students and foreigners working in Japan do come here.

Q: Going forward, are you thinking of offering courses in English?
A: It would be rather difficult to provide courses themselves in English, but we do have staff capable of speaking English to customers drinking tea in the tearoom space. When inbound travel resumes, we would certainly like to do that.

Q: What especially do you place importance on in practice here?
A: Well, the concept of Salon, and the origin of the Salon brand name in Japanese, is "Contemplating beauty through tea," so we place importance on polishing your sense of value and aesthetic sense through tea. Our aim is to enable people to acquire a spirit of hospitality, a model for realizing this spirit, and knowledge to add color to this model so that their own measures for seeing things, measures for thinking, and viewpoint change and their daily lives are enriched.

Q: Do you have any new ideas for the future?
A: We are distributing various contents through online courses and so on via Instalive and Zoom so that, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, people can enjoy the tea ceremony in their own homes. People use this online service when there is no Salon nearby or when they are unable to go outdoors. We also provide links to the workshops of artisans making tea ceremony utensils and confectionery. We want to do more of this in the future.

Q: What do you think is the place of the tea ceremony in Japanese culture?
A: I think the tea ceremony can be the axis for all kinds of Japanese culture and lifestyle. The tea ceremony is related to clothing, cuisine, and housing, and I believe it enriches life. It indicates the way of living and lifestyle of the Japanese people.

Q: Have you felt anything in particular amid the Covid-19 pandemic?
A: Once again I have become keenly aware that guests are part and parcel of the tea ceremony. Because of the pandemic, it has become difficult to hold large tea gatherings, full tea ceremonies with meals, and other events. But maybe by choosing who to

commune with---in other words, by sharing with family members or close friends---we have been able to return to the essence of the tea ceremony, which is the idea of "one taste, one mind." In addition, the tea ceremony is a good way of enriching your time at home. It is very relaxing to carefully prepare tea at home for yourself or your family and to savor it. Moreover, matcha contains a lot of caffeine, which has a stimulant effect, and serotonin, which moderates mood, so a cup of green tea is most relaxing. Overseas matcha has been described as a "superfood" with substantial health benefits.

It would be a shame not to experience the tea ceremony and a shame not to include it in your daily life. As Ms. Watanuki said, "The tea ceremony is lifelong. You can begin anytime, and even if you quit, you can resume anytime." First of all, why not take that initial step into tea ceremony culture?

Cooperation:

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Business hours
Lessons: 10:30–20:00
Shop: 10:30–20:00
*Currently operating shortened business hours.
*Regular holidays are the same as those for the facility as a whole.
https://salon-tea.jp/shop/ (Japanese)