



siptripping: JAPAN

Tokyo's

Art of the Cocktail

Throughout its history, Japan has produced art, technical innovations and cuisine noted for precision, artistry and attention to small details. Tokyo's urban cocktail scene follows suit.





A nighttime walk through Tokyo's neighborhoods can be as overwhelming as it is breathtaking. No matter what neighborhood you visit, be it high rent Ginza and Marunouchi, high energy Harajuku, Roppongi and Shibuya, or relaxed-yet-trendy Ebisu, Daikanyama and Kuramae, the maze-like narrow streets and complex address numbering system means you'll need discipline and patience to find the city's most inventive and inviting bars—even with your trusty Google Maps app. The same often holds true for luxury hotel lounges and restaurants hidden atop tall (but unassuming) office buildings.

Once you are inside, however, your patience will be rewarded when you observe the bartenders put that same focus and determination into crafting

their drinks, down to the dense ice spheres and cubes keeping everything chilled until the last sip. And because scanning menus can be as perplexing as the process of finding that bar, you may accidentally stumble onto something that will make you forget what you originally intended to order.

SEEKING WHISKY AND MORE

Whisky bars are a time-honored institution in Tokyo and Japan's larger cities, and you can't go wrong with *izakayas* (pubs) such as **Hounen Manpuku Izakaya**, at once posh and informal, featuring a reliable mix of simple, drinkable cocktails with Suntory whisky and soda or fruit juice. In Shinjuku you'll find one of Tokyo's oldest bar districts, Golden Gai.





Though this area is touristy, it's worth a visit for a taste of a still-thriving scene made up of tiny bars no bigger than your closet, drawing patrons in through the distinctive themes and décor of individual bars.

The craft cocktail bar scene that the locals embrace, meanwhile, is roughly a decade old. These relaxed spots are in contrast to the masculine, clubby and pricey whisky bars, informal pubs and demure saké tasting spots that all have made an impression in the West through movies, television, and even your parents' old vacation photos. To get a complete picture of Japanese bar culture, of course, start with tips from locals on their favorite spots in those genres and leave any expectations you may have at the door.

Bar Benfiddich, for example, turns the concept of the staid and stately Japanese whisky bar on its head while adhering to traditions that make the format so beloved among different generations of imbibers. "The Japanese bar is small, and has a culture similar to the Japanese tea house," explains owner Hiroyasu Kayama. "While we continue to protect the past, we adapt ideas for the future. We make cocktails with



fresh herbs from my farm, and we distill absinthe in our two-liter pot stills with anise, fennel, wormwood and more."

A-MAZE-ING DISCOVERIES

Many cocktail bars with a strong local buzz and the most interesting personalities are still well-guarded secrets. This is exemplified by **Gen Yamamoto's** eight-seat atelier in residential Azabu-Juban, hidden between Ebisu and Shibuya. Here, a night out for cocktails blends theater and visual art. Advance reservations and a taxi ride with an

astute driver are required—especially as word has gotten out that international culinary superstars such as Spain's José Andrés made the trek to Yamamoto's stage. A session with the master runs between \$45 (four cocktails) and \$65 (six cocktails).

The soft-spoken Yamamoto, attired in a dapper white jacket and tie, lets his technique do the talking. The show is not about "flair" bartending (i.e. juggling shakers and twirling). His movements are small, precise and deliberate. The appearance and flavor profiles of his ever-changing lineup of



drinks are unforgettable and also hard to duplicate, even if you keep a close eye on every step of his process. The mid-autumn hued works of art served are magnificent still-life works built on a palette lacquered wood, Murano glass-ware and a fresh chrysanthemum—a gooseberry and junmai ginjo (top grade) saké cocktail; a Nagano-raised Granny Smith apple creation with barley shochu and matcha tea garnish; and a Hokkaido grand champion pear blended with sweet shochu and sweet potato essence.

Yamamoto is not the only one who knows how to make a big impression in a small space. Rogerio Igarashi Vaz, who has Brazilian and Japanese ancestry to draw from, transforms classic “Western” cocktails into new and refreshing surprises at **Bar Tram** and **Bar Trench**. These little bars, conceived by business partner Takuya Itoh, are themselves a cocktail of European, North American and Asian cultural influences, from playful menus to eclectic décor.

Though Itoh’s Shibuya establishments draw a healthy mix of young





Tokyo professionals, expats and visitors, he's bent on taking Tokyo's cocktail landscape as far as it can go.

"Our bars mix Japanese bartending with Western ways of bartending," Itoh explains, describing his concepts as a culmination of his training in New York City under a Japanese master bartender, the "traditional Japanese-ginza ways" he learned bartending on his home turf, and observations of bars in cities beyond these places. This is, of course, passed on to Igarashi Vaz and his fellow bartenders.

"Our team takes Western ideas of craftsmanship and creativity back to their roots, and then mixes them with a Japanese way of thinking that involves the precision that's part of our cultural DNA," Itoh continues. "Bartenders and owners are considered artisans. While Western hotel bars have staff members who clean the bar and prep ingredients, we do everything ourselves from start to

finish, as (doing the whole job) is part of the mental and spiritual training of being an artisan."

I found out about **Mixology Tokyo** through Lloyd Nakano, a hospitality industry veteran (and sidecar and martini aficionado) also interested in learning why it is on Tokyo's craft cocktail radar. Even with a trusty Google Maps app tuned on, we stroll through Yaesu (a swath of low-rise restaurants and small businesses neighboring glitzy Marunouchi area) and circle the block several times before spying a small, elegant sign that points us up a flight of stairs.

I'm impressed with how Mixology Tokyo pulls off the finesse of the formal whisky bar without pretention or attitude. We are handed a prolific menu packed with familiar Western bar staples, old-school Japanese drinks and a handful of original barrel-aged cocktails. Before we make our selections,

bartender Shingo Kasori insists we try some of their off-the-menu infusions including wasabi-tinged gin, umami-infused cognac, and a surprisingly delicious blue cheese cognac infusion wonderful on its own or as a cocktail foundation.

"I think Japanese cocktails should reflect such Japanese aesthetics and ideas such as importance of negative space or hidden elements that make customers imagine what may or may not be in the glass," says Shuzo Nagumo, the owner who like Itoh, is in full-on expansion mode. "We also make each recipe with the idea of **"ichi-go ichi-e,"** celebrating a moment that might happen just once in a lifetime, such as the transition of a certain season or meeting a fascinating person for the first or last time. These are cocktails that result in telling a story, and that story may resonate with the person drinking the cocktail."

TOKYO BREWERIES

Before we have finished beautifully crafted cocktails, our companions insist we hit the Old Imperial Bar within the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Imperial Palace Hotel, commissioned by the aristocracy to attract well-traveled Western visitors. The site of Tokyo's first modern cocktail scene (in the 1920s) still thrives today, and in many respects bridges the intimate settings of independently owned bars with the international grandeur of 21st Century hotel bars in Tokyo as well as Kyoto and other major cities.

HOTEL BARS: A HIGHER POWER

Lobby bars in such posh digs as the Conrad, Mandarin Oriental, Peninsula and Shangri-La outposts are as bright and expansive as the indie bars are intimate. However, the bartenders are as eager to blur the lines between East and West, and reinvent old recipes based on the changing tastes of customers coming through their doors. You won't find "flair" bartending at these spots, either. However, the managements are all big on eliciting lasting first impressions of guests expecting cocktails as visually modern as the surroundings and flavor profiles that seamlessly blend what's in season, Japanese spirits, and internationally recognizable vodkas, gin, tequilas and rums.

The **Conrad Tokyo** integrates saké

and French Champagne into their whimsical "Poptails," and has a saké sommelier on staff to expand guests' saké vocabulary and comfort zones. Presentation is king at the bar of the **Peter B** restaurant at the **Peninsula Tokyo**. Their perpetually changing iPad cocktail menu makes the process of selecting the cocktail as dizzyingly fun as whatever drink the imbibor chooses. The exception is the permanent signature "Tokyo Joe" (inspired by the film of the same name starring Humphrey Bogart), with Bombay Sapphire gin, Drambuie, plum liqueur, cranberry and lemon juices.

"Because there are more Japanese bartenders working overseas and

Just as whisky fans from the U.S. want to learn more about how their spirits are crafted, so do their counterparts in Japan. Therefore saké brewery tours in Tokyo, Kyoto and Kobe are gaining steam powerful enough to prep the rice for a premium *junmai daiginjo saké*. In the same spirit of the Bourbon Trail running through Kentucky, Japan's saké trail is blazing hot at the moment.

The 120 year-old Ishikawa Brewery, in Fusso City at the furthest edge of Tokyo Prefecture, now has its 17th generation owner at the helm. This alone would downright impress the Kentucky Bourbon dynasties. A trip to this beautiful compound combines a thorough rundown of the sake and beer brewery's inner workings, historic homesteads, company store, and an excellent soba restaurant whose food is crafted from the spring water used for their beverages. In the summer, there are even live performances.

getting high scores in international competitions, we are seeing more cocktails on Tokyo menus with a Western twist, such as using a (rotary) evaporator to infuse a spirit or create smoke," observes Yukiko Kurihara, bar manager at the **Mandarin Oriental Tokyo**. "However, by including Japanese whisky or saké in the recipe, we get flavors that are more mild than Western spirits."

Shangri-La Tokyo bartender Jun Okubo, meanwhile, connects the interest in modern Japanese bartending in Tokyo with the continued global rise in popularity of Japanese food and flavors. The display area behind Okubo is lined with a half dozen infusions, which he says ensures that Shangri-La's cocktails will be one-of-a-kind experiences.

"The base of most of our original cocktails at The Lobby Lounge is infused spirits, where we bring in Asian or Japanese ingredients," Okubo says. "Our concept is a perfect marriage of Western cocktail culture and Asian culinary culture that will result in cocktails that everybody coming to our bar will enjoy. Infusing enables me to keep the recipes simple, but still have a flavor profile that stands out. In a Cosmopolitan cocktail recipe, for example, I will use lime leaf or bamboo leaf-infused in Vodka to add that unique ethnic essence."

—ELYSE GLICKMAN



WHERE TO SIP

The Independents

GEN YAMAMOTO

Anniversary Building 1F,
1-6-4 Azabu-Juban,
Minato-ku, Tokyo, 106-0045
genyamamoto.jp

BAR BEN FIDDICH

1-13-7 Nishishinjuku
9F Yamatoya Bldg.
Shinjuku-ku Tokyo 160-0023
facebook.com/BarBenfiddich/

BAR TRAM

Shibuya-ku Ebisunishi 1-7-13-2F
1-7-13 Ebisunishi Shibuya Tokyo
Shibuya, Tokyo
small-axe.net

BAR TRENCH

Shibuya-ku Ebisuzan
1-5-8 DIS Building 102
1-5-8 Ebisunishi Shibuya Tokyo
small-axe.net

BAR ORCHARD

6-5-16 Ginza,
Chuo 104-0061, Tokyo
facebook.com/barorchardginza

HONEN MANPUKU IZAKAYA

1-8-6 Nihonbashi Muromachi
Chuo 103-0022, Tokyo
hounenmanpuku.com

MIXOLOGY LABORATORY TOKYO

Yaesu Dai 3 Park Bldg 3F, 1-6-1
Yaesu, 103-0028 Chuo-ku, Tokyo
r.goope.jp/spirits-sharing

MIXOLOGY AKASAKA

Torin Akasaka Bldg 2F,
3-14-3 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo
r.goope.jp/spirits-sharing/top

MIXOLOGY EXPERIENCE

Hama Roppongi Bldg 4F, 6-2-35
Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo
r.goope.jp/spirits-sharing/top

MIXOLOGY SALON

GINZA SIX 13F, 6-10-1 Ginza,
Chuoku, Tokyo
r.goope.jp/spirits-sharing/top

ISHIKAWA BREWERY

Including Zougura Japanese Restaurant
1 Kumagawa, Fussa,
Tokyo 197-0003, Japan
tamajiman.com/english

The Hotel Lobby Bars

CONRAD TOKYO

1-9-1 Higashi-Shinbashi, Minato
105-7337, Tokyo Prefecture
conradhotels3.hilton.com

THE SHANGRI-LA TOKYO

Marunouchi Trust Tower Main,
1-8-3 Marunouchi,
Chiyoda, Tokyo 100-8283, Japan
shangri-la.com/tokyo/shangrila

PETER THE LOUNGE AT PENINSULA TOKYO

1-8-1 Yurakucho,
Chiyoda, Tokyo 100-0006
tokyo.peninsula.com

MANDARIN ORIENTAL TOKYO

2-1-1 Nihonbashi Muromachi,
Chuo-ku, Tokyo 103-8328
www.mandarinoriental.com

OLD IMPERIAL BAR AT THE IMPERIAL HOTEL

1-1-1 Uchisaiwaicho
Chiyoda 100-8558, Tokyo Prefecture
imperialhotel.co.jp/e/tokyo/



TOKYO SIPS

Kemari (Japanese Moscow Mule)

THE CONRAD TOKYO

MAKES 1 DRINK

- 1½ oz ginger-infused vodka
- 3 to 4 oz sparkling saké, such as Jozen Mizunogotoshi 9
- fresh ginger

1. In a mixing glass, combine ginger-infused vodka and sparkling saké.
2. Slice ginger into thin pieces. Add ginger pieces to spirit mix, then chill for several minutes.
3. Serve over ice in a julep cup.

Conrad Sakétini

MAKES 1 DRINK

- 3 oz saké, such as Hokusetsu 28
- ½ oz dry vermouth
- Lime peel swirl, for garnish

1. In a shaker filled with ice, combine saké and vermouth. Shake well.
2. Strain into a martini glass.
3. Garnish with lime peel.

Conrad Poptail (“Orange”) with Persimmon

MAKES 6 TO 8

This Champagne-based cocktail features a popsicle made with dried Japanese persimmon, freshly squeezed Japanese citron and spice. Saké lees is used as a hidden flavor.

- 2 to 3 oz Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label Champagne (per cocktail)

For the popsicles

- 8 oz dried Japanese persimmon
- 1 oz lime juice
- 1 quart mandarin orange juice
- 1¼ oz fresh ginger, peeled
- 1 oz saké lees
- 7 oz sugar

1. In a blender, combine all ingredients; blend until fully combined.





2. Pour liquid in to 2 oz or 3 oz popsicle molds; freeze overnight.
3. Pour Champagne into a red wine or cognac glass; add a popsicle and serve.

Ajisai

YUKIYO KURIHARA, BAR MANAGER,
MANDARIN ORIENTAL TOKYO

MAKES 1 DRINK

- 1 oz Hendrick's Gin
- 2 oz Okunomatsu Sparkling Saké
- 1 tsp molasses
- 4 pinches hanaho (purple flowers on anise mint)
- green tea powder, to rim glass

1. Rim glass with green tea powder.
2. In a shaker filled with ice, shake gin and molasses together.

3. Strain contents into a rimmed coupe glass; top with saké.
4. Garnish with hanaho.

Tosa Mary

YUKIYO KURIHARA, BAR MANAGER,
MANDARIN ORIENTAL TOKYO

MAKES 1 DRINK

- 1½ oz Dabada Hiburi, infused with yuzu and ginger
- 1½ oz tomato juice
- ¾ oz strawberry purée
- Splash ginger ale
- Ginger powder, for garnish

1. Rim a tall glass with ginger powder. Fill with ice.
2. In a shaker, combine Dabada Hiburi, tomato juice and strawberry purée.

3. Pour into the rimmed glass. Top with ginger ale.

Cloudy Yuzu Sour

JUN OHKUBO, THE SHANGRI-LA TOKYO

MAKES 1 DRINK

To make yuzu-infused gin, grill yuzu peels, add to gin and steep to taste. You can use grapefruit peels in place of yuzu if you wish.

- 1½ oz grilled yuzu-infused gin
- ¾ oz Harvey's Bristol Cream Sherry
- 1 egg white
- ¾ oz fresh lemon juice
- ¾ oz simple syrup
- 1 shaved grilled yuzu peel

1. In a shaker, combine gin, sherry, egg white, lemon juice and simple syrup. Dry shake for 30 seconds, to incorporate the egg white.

2. Add ice and shake vigorously for 1 minute. Strain into a rocks glass.
3. Garnish with yuzu peel.

Four Seams

SHUZO NAGUMO, BAR MIXOLOGY

MAKES 1 DRINK

You can find black sesame syrup and paste at Japanese markets.

- 1½ oz Hinoki cypress-infused vodka
- ½ oz lemon juice
- ½ oz black sesame syrup or paste
- 1 oz yuzu simple syrup
- egg white
- Miso powder, for garnish
- Yukari salt, for garnish
- Dashi salt, for garnish

1. Garnish a “mas” (traditional wood saké cup) with different seasonings on each corner: miso powder, yukari salt and dashi salt.
2. In a shaker, combine vodka, lemon juice, black sesame syrup, yuzu syrup and egg white.
3. Shake vigorously, then carefully pour into cup.

Phangan

SHUZO NAGUMO, BAR MIXOLOGY

MAKES 1 DRINK

To make banana-washed rum, add butter-baked banana to the rum at room temperature; chill in freezer until fat solidifies and can easily be skimmed off. This drink looks great served in a coconut “cup” with a banana leaf coaster.

- 1½ oz baked banana-washed Bacardi 8-Year Rum
- 1½ oz cold-brewed coffee, preferably made with fresh coconut water
- 1 to 2 dashes Bob’s Chocolate bitters or Bob’s Vanilla bitters

1. In a mixing glass with block ice, stir together rum, coffee and bitters.
2. Strain into coconut cup or rocks glass.



