

TABLE TALK

Il Ristrante e Italiano Chiacchiere

Tokyo boasts countless Chinese and French restaurants, many offering authentic food of such quality that the flavor often surpasses that found in the countries of origin. Over the past 20 years, however, Italian restaurants have undoubtedly come into their own and have in fact usurped the status previously held by their French counterparts. Up until the late 70s, it was pizza or spaghetti that sprang to mind at the thought of Italian food and it was these dishes that mainly appeared on the menu at Italian restaurants. The transformation is, therefore, even more staggering, considering the meagerness of the former choice.

There are apparently over 4,000 Italian restaurants serving pasta in Tokyo, but according to the chef of my choice, Walter dal Col, who was born in Veneto, Italy, only 10% of those can really be proud of serving genuine Italian food.

Since opening his restaurant *Chiacchiere* in July 1996, he has kept faithfully to his conviction that the basis of Italian cuisine is good home cooking. For this reason, he offers his customers healthy, delicious yet simple fare, over half of the ingredients being directly imported from Italy.

The reputation of the restaurant is verified by the fact that the entire catering for a reception held at the Italian Embassy was put into the hands of the *Chiacchiere* and its chef, when the Italian President came to Japan on a state visit and gave a banquet attended by their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress, and 400 other guests on April 16th this year.

With seating for 95 people, the restaurant is always full of contented customers obviously enjoying themselves both at lunch time and in the evening. And perhaps the secret of its enormous popularity lies in the teamwork of Walter dal Col and 34 year-old manager Giorgio Matera who was born in Puglia, Italy. A true character and a genius when it comes to dealing with customers, Giorgio Matera always has a smile on his face. He is also blessed with the gift of being able to tell immediately what someone would like to eat and to come up with a



Mr. Giorgio Matera and Mr. Walter dal Col

dish that will please them. He is capable of having an in-depth conversation about a wide range of topics in Japanese, which he has mastered in the relatively short time since his arrival here in 1989.

The interior is very tastefully furnished and with its high ceilings, the restaurant is a very pleasant place to enjoy an excellent Italian meal. The quality of the wine, too, is exceptional with over 70 varieties of marvellous *Grappa* on the wine list in addition to various other wines imported from around Italy.

I am including a sample menu that I can thoroughly recommend as a guide, but obviously it is best to discuss the menu of the day with Giorgio Matera himself before ordering. The meaning of the word *Chiacchiere* is "chatter" in English.

Asparagi Parmigiana (White Asparagus with Parmesan Sauce) ¥3,000

Gnocchi oi Spinaci (Spinach and Potato *Gnocchi* Lombardy-style) ¥2,000

Linguine/Spaghetti Granchio (King Crab *Linguine/Spaghetti*) ¥2,500

Coba oi Rospo (Angler Fish in Tomato Sauce) ¥3,500

Imago ¥1996 White Wine ¥6,000

Taurino ¥1990 Red Wine ¥8,000

Chiacchiere

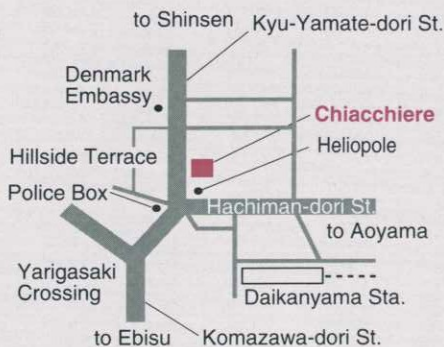
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OUTING

Kyoto in the Heat

Story and Photos by Bill Tingey

Modern Japan is unthinkable without air conditioning. It makes the hot humid summer months in the city a little more bearable but not necessarily more comfortable. After all, who wants to live in a refrigerator!

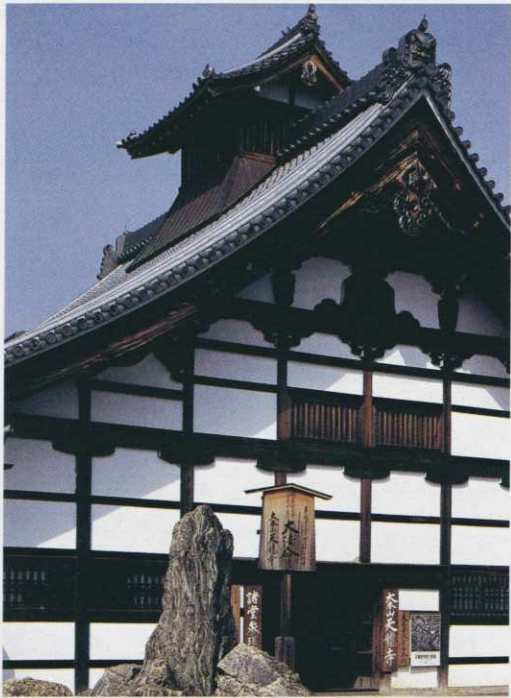
But if you should find yourself in Kyoto in the heat of summer, there is an alternative. Venture out to Tenryuji temple on the western outskirts of the city. Here against a backdrop of the arborous mountains of Arashiyama, you will find temple buildings with high floors and open airy interiors capped by sweeping roofs and deep eaves, all features which are a refined architectural response to the climatic conditions of a Japanese summer.

Tenryuji is a Zen temple which was established in 1339. The present buildings, however, were erected in 1900, previous ones having been destroyed by successive fires. And with its magnificent gardens, Tenryuji is now on the list of UNESCO World Heritage.

With all the screens of the building open and almost no exterior walls, breezes drift through the interior, entering the building on one side and leaving it on the other totally unhindered. To be able to sit in this open plan interior on the *tatami* matted floor and gaze out at the meditative



Zen-style lunch, a feast for the eyes



The imposing entrance to Tenryūji temple

garden, lake and misty mountains beyond is respite enough from the draining heat and humidity. But Tenryūji also offers satisfaction to the eye and palate by way of Zen-style vegetarian cuisine.

Although not quite as ascetic as the meals consumed by monks committed

to devotional training, the lunch offered here respects the principles of a form of sustenance which is seen as being "necessary for the proper functioning of the mind and body, but never something to live for."

Appetizingly presented in red bowls and on a red tray, each delicately arranged item represents part of a harmonious ensemble of flavors and textures without resorting to the use of ingredients which might ravage the taste buds rather than delight and captivate. Undoubtedly, some of the tastes and textures may surprise those

unaccustomed to the attributes of Japanese cooking but there is nothing really to offend.

Both food and surroundings here can provide the heat weary with much to ease the spirit and in turn help to lower the virtual temperature. But this is not the only alternative to air-conditioning.



Miyawaki folding fans—an elegant way of keeping cool

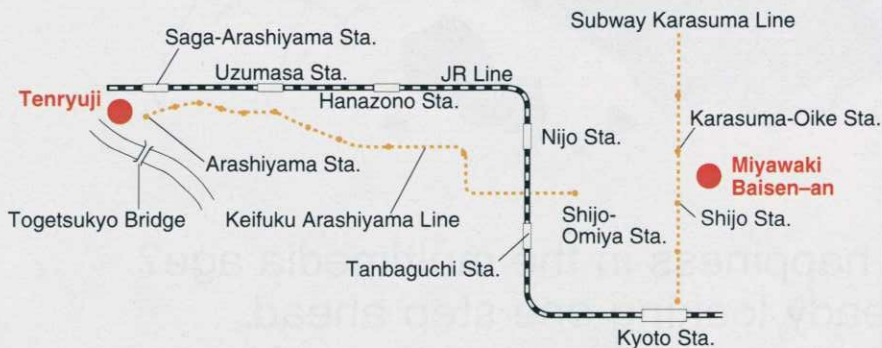
Far less sophisticated relief from the heat can be provided by the folding fan, which seems to have been a Japanese invention. Originally used by courtiers and made of leaves of cedar wood joined by thread, these fans were exported to China during the latter part of the Heian period (794–1185) but later came back in the Muromachi period (1392–1573) in a more cohesive form. Chinese craftsmen had learned to fashion bamboo ribs paired down to a sliver and had inserted them between two layers of paper, thus creating the form of fan that was to become so indicative of the East.

Subsequently in Japan, their use spread to the general populace, and the design and pictorial possibilities of the paper 'canvas' were exploited in a multitude of ways. Folding fans found their niche in tea ceremony and *Noh*. And in more recent times, the simplicity of their construction has even made them suitable as a promotional give-away.

Nowadays, quality fans can be found at Miyawaki Baisen-an. Almost a museum of the fan, the interior of this shop is decorated with a number of delightful fan motifs. Sadly though, so few people feel inclined to use the folding fan today. It is, nevertheless, as elegant a way of keeping cool as ever it was.

Kyoto is easily reached by train. Tenryūji is close to the Arashiyama terminal of the Keifuku Dentetsu, a railway of streetcar proportions running from Shijo in central Kyoto. Miyawaki Baisen-an is at Rokkakudori, Tominokoji Nishi-iru, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto (Tel: 075 221 0181 Fax: 075 221 0439). Fans of various kinds can also be seen and

purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (Tel: 03 3403 2460). Other Japanese crafts can be found at <http://www.wnn.or.jp/wnn-craft/eng/index.html> For tourist information, contact the Japan National Tourist Office in English (Tel: 03 3201 3331), or access <http://www.jnto.go.jp>



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