

KINFOLK



THE ESSENTIALS ISSUE

Living a life based on the essentials is less about minimalism and more about celebrating who and what we value most.

A Sense of Belonging

Food, water and shelter may be the tenets of survival, but our need to connect and belong to a community is just as significant.

Taking Life Less Seriously

Side-splitters, knee-slappers and gigglers: Whatever way you choose to laugh, it's one of the world's simplest and most unifying joys.

Neighborhood: Yanaka

While so much of Tokyo is in constant motion and blazing brightly, the calm district of Yanaka manages to slow the pace of city living while honoring old-world traditions and welcoming modern ideas.

A gray cat slinks past a wooden house. Two elderly ladies in indigo headscarves sell rice crackers at an old glass counter. A young cobbler slices through a piece of mustard leather in a tiny shoemaking atelier. It's a sunny Friday morning in early spring, and these snatched moments are unfolding in a quietly humming neighborhood that appears to be the antithesis of 21st-century urban life. Judging by the peaceful atmosphere, unrushed residents and leisurely tempo, you'd never guess that this setting is hidden in the shadows of one of the most fast-paced cities on the planet: Tokyo.

Few cities are as strongly defined by their bustling reputations as Tokyo. Simply hearing the name of the sprawling Japanese capital is likely to evoke images of cloud-brushing skyscrapers, neon billboards, trend-triggering teen tribes and a sea of salarymen. But there's one corner of Tokyo where all urban stereotypes dissolve and life moves at a less predictable rhythm: Yanaka, an old-fashioned neighborhood that sanctifies a slower pace of life.

Yanaka's location in eastern Tokyo falls within the central confines of the JR Yamanote train line that encircles the city, yet despite its metropolitan setting, it inhabits a different world entirely from elsewhere in the capital. Here, atmospheric leafy lanes are filled with elderly bike-riding residents, well-preserved wooden houses, exquisite temples and multigenerational family businesses alongside a growing community of young creatives. (Not to mention its cats:

The neighborhood is famed for its wild feline population, with countless cats happily going about their daily business among their human neighbors.)

Yanaka is a textbook example of *shitamachi*, a Japanese word that goes far beyond its literal meaning of "downtown" to evoke the nostalgia of the tightly knit working-class neighborhoods of Tokyo's postwar years. In a similarly old-school vein, Yanaka successfully functions as a self-contained community, thanks to its array of specialty shops, such as tofu makers, rice sellers and green tea merchants, which all still thrive thanks to the absence of big-name chains.

Yanaka owes its special ambience to several historical happenings: Unlike vast areas of Tokyo, the neighborhood survived both the destruction of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake and the bombing blitz of the 1945 US air raids. After being spared from these devastating events, a high concentration of temples were added to the neighborhood (dozens were relocated to Yanaka following a 17th-century fire that wiped out much of the city), which cemented its status as an area with a truly unique cultural heritage.

It may have been this atmosphere of architectural preservation—rare in a city with a famously hyperactive skyline—that contributed to Yanaka becoming a hub for craftspeople. This creative spirit lives on today with young Tokyoites continuing to be drawn to Yanaka's community of makers, intimate atmosphere, comparatively

- 1 Kayaba offers warm beverages and hot buttered toast to visitors stopping in after a visit to SCAI the Bathhouse gallery, which is just around the corner.
- 2 SCAI the Bathhouse was renovated into a gallery in 1993 after standing as one of Japan's public bathhouses for 200 years.
- 3 The calm streets of Yanaka make for a beautiful backdrop for early morning strolls to and from the market.



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low rents and a slower and more rewarding pace of life.

Among those seduced by Yanaka's charms is Ichiro Kanai, who recalls with near-evangelical clarity the moment he first stumbled upon the area while out cycling 11 years ago. "I saw something very different from anywhere else in Tokyo that day," he says. "It felt very unusual and special—the sky was wide and open, and there was a sense of the familiar that took me back to when I was a child. It felt as though I'd been here a long time before."

Marking a turning point in his life, Ichiro moved from his home near the neon glare of the Shibuya district to Yanaka, where he set up *tokyobike*, a company that makes simple urban bicycles. Its pared-down design and functional concept draws

on the spirit of Yanaka, and the company's sleek, rainbow-hued frames have since become cult favorites with seven international stores from New York to Berlin.

But *tokyobike*'s headquarters—and its heart—remain in Yanaka. Here, the main store is housed in an atmospheric 80-year-old former liquor store where bike frames are showcased behind a wooden facade and an old tiled roof. "People don't walk very fast in Yanaka like in other places in Tokyo. They even ride their bikes a bit more slowly," Ichiro says. "Basically they aren't in a rush: They eat slowly and they enjoy life. There's also a very strong sense of community. We're friendly and open-minded here. It may be an old town with a storied history, but it's very accepting of new things and new people. The community attracts



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young creative types—this slow and open quality allows them to take their time to create beautiful things."

Another one of Yanaka's appeals is that many businesses that have been passed down through generations are still alive and well. Several are found within the retro confines of Yanaka Ginza, a narrow, lantern-lined shopping street known as a *shotengai*.

Included on this list of family businesses is Maruatsu Fukushima Shoten, a fishmonger that first opened its doors 80 years ago where locals can pick up shellfish and freshwater fish. Musashiya, which has been open since 1923, is another essential pit stop that offers tubs of hand-made tofu, and Echigoya Honten, a shop specializing in sake, opened 110 years ago





- 1 Ryu Takahashi, owner of Classico, opened the compact shop in 2006.
 - 2 Customers test out special paints used for traditional *Nihonga* painting at art-supply shop Tokuouken.
 - 3 Shelves at Tokuouken are filled with pigment paints in every possible color.
- Following pages: Mountain bikes were designed for mountains, while tokyobikes were designed for Tokyo.



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and is now operated by fourth-generation owner Toshihiro Honma. "Yanaka's location is very special and hasn't changed for at least 30 years—maybe that's the charm," Toshihiro says. "It's getting quite popular these days. Perhaps it's because it reminds everyone of the local *shotengai* they went to with their families as children."

The Suzuki family is the third generation to run the nearby 80-year-old Niku no Suzuki. Customers line up daily for its famed *menchi katsu*, a luscious breaded beef cutlet that melts in the mouth and is made with a secret spice blend. When asked how many of these are sold daily, the answer is typically Yanakan: "No one keeps track of that," Mrs. Suzuki says, laughing. "I suppose it all depends on the weather: On rainy days we don't sell as many, but

on sunny ones more customers come, so we sell more!"

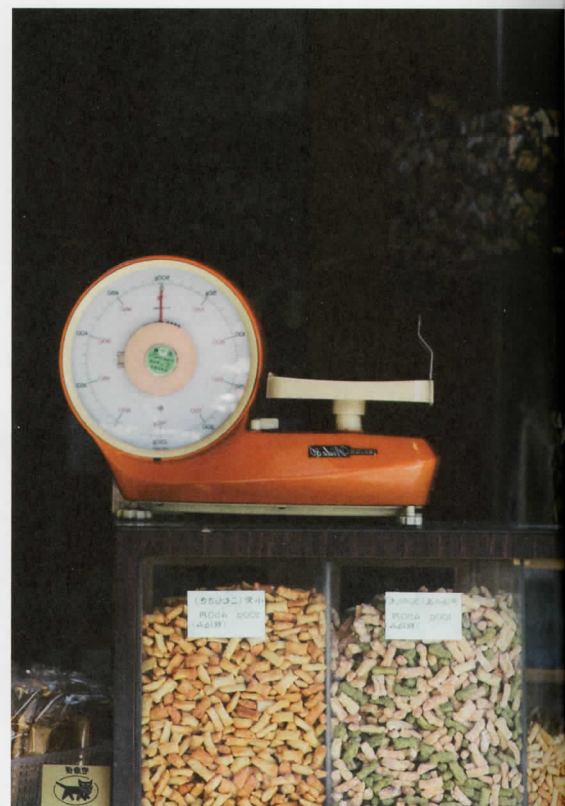
The art supply store Tokuouken is another Yanaka landmark. The century-old space is home to one of the few shops in Japan that specializes in pigment paints used in traditional *Nihonga* artwork and has customers ranging from art students to contemporary artists such as Takashi Murakami. The shop's walls are lined with more than 300 bottles of different colored powder pigments, each made from careful blends of minerals, shells and rare stones. "Many *Nihonga* painters lived in Yanaka in the past," explains fourth-generation owner Yukiko Miyauchi. "Today, mainly art students and artists come here. The paints are difficult to use, so only people who know about them visit."

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But everything in Yanaka isn't old-school. One relative newcomer is Atelier de Florentina, a calm, minimal bakery set up by former food writer Mihoko Kajiwara. She first opened a tiny space on Yanaka's Snake Lane in 2010 before moving to Yanaka Ginza several years ago. Today, she bakes half a dozen different types of Florentine cookies a day in flavors such as yuzu and baked apple. She believes that the allure of the area is multifaceted, from the "warm air" that flows through Yanaka's lanes to the locals' respect for small businesses and handmade products. "We love this area so much," she explains. "Yanaka is not just an old town—it also has a mixed culture and a variety of faces. It's an art town, a temple town, a tourism town, a writer's town. Instead of large chain shops,



- 1 Mihoko Kajiwara and her husband, Makoto, offer special Florentine cookies at their shop Atelier de Florentina.
- 2 The old-school snack shop known as an *okakiya* is typical of the Yanaka neighborhood.
- 3 A selection of well-made clothing stocks the Classico showroom.



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there are lots of attractive individual stores. It's all about small places, handmade products and communication."

Hajime Sonoda, a talented shoemaker who runs a small boutique that painstakingly handcrafts leather shoes from scratch, echoes the same sentiments that Mihoko expresses. Like many of the best things in Yanaka, his shoes are made quietly and slowly using quality craftsmanship, soft leathers and a self-described "modern vintage" aesthetic. His customers travel from far and wide, and they not only have impeccable taste but also patience: A single pair can take up to eight months to be completed from the first fitting to final delivery. "We have a good sense of community in this area," he says. "We greet

each other and have brief conversations every morning when local people pass by. We sometimes also gather for dinner or invite people to our atelier for *nabe* hot pot."

This lack of pretension among residents—usually found in rural communities rather than hyper-modern cities—filters down to the local businesses. One such example is a design boutique called Classico. Set on a quiet green lane in two simple rooms that seem more like a home than a retail space, the store showcases humble, functional items for everyday living from stationery and toothbrushes to ceramics and basic clothing. Owner Ryu Takahashi is unwaveringly clear about the type who is drawn to the area: "It's for people who

have their own sense of style. Many specialty shops are scattered throughout residential areas here. Individual owners are able to represent what they like in their own way."

While Yanaka is clearly handcrafted heaven, its appeal goes far beyond shopping. Home to many tiny blink-and-you-miss-it gastronomical gems, Yanaka also celebrates the art of good eating (without rushing, of course).

Some swear by *Lemon no Mi*, where visitors wait in line to sit at a wooden counter and eat whatever homemade dish the owner Maiko fancies making that day. Other hungry locals make a pilgrimage to *Tabi Bagel*, a tiny bakery filled with an exotic selection of bagels. *Hagiso*, a house

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converted into an atmospheric café and gallery, is another popular lunch spot, and locals also swoon over the steaming bowls of soba noodles washed down with sake at Takajo.

In addition to being spoiled with both food and shopping options, Yanaka's residents have something else to celebrate: an impressive community spirit that casts an invisible link between everyone in the area. Ask any newcomers about their experiences here and they'll name a number of residents or businesses that have been especially kind and supportive.

One person who knows all about this open spirit is Masami Shiraishi, the president of one of Yanaka's most inspirational landmarks: SCAI the Bathhouse,

an independent art gallery housed in a 200-year-old former bathhouse. Here, beneath a charmingly curved tiled roof and towering chimney, exhibitions by world-class artists such as Anish Kapoor, Lee Ufan and Tatsuo Miyajima are regularly showcased.

Masami is a pioneer in the area: He opened his gallery in 1993 and more recently renovated the generations-old coffee shop Kayaba just around the corner. He continues to play an active role in the community today—his latest project involves transforming three abandoned houses into a bakery, beer hall and small market. "Yanaka has a close-knit community with intimate local interaction," he says. "People greet one another across narrow

residential streets and many traditional manners are still being practiced. Much of Tokyo's cityscape has lost its original charm, but those charms have been kept intact in this neighborhood. And it's conveniently located within the Yamanote line, so it's not even in suburban Tokyo."

But the ultimate endorsement for Yanaka can perhaps be echoed by some of its most populous residents: the cats. As Mihoko from Atelier de Florentina muses with a smile: "Cats have always been drawn to quiet, peaceful neighborhoods. They know that in Yanaka they'll be safe and find food. They basically understand that it's the nicest place to live in Tokyo." And cats don't get that kind of thing wrong.