

FORK IN THE ROAD

WHAT TO EAT WHEN YOU GET THERE



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A RIDDLE OF A DRINK

In the watering holes of Tokyo, the highball reigns supreme

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY LIZA WEISSTUCH**
The Washington Post

Like nearly every bar in Tokyo, Star Bar — a subterranean cocktail spot in a nondescript building in the humming commercial district of Ginza — features a highball on the menu.

Unlike other bars in Tokyo, it calls its version a Ninja Ice Highball. That's because the hand-cut ice block, a narrow rectangle with precise edges, is frozen in a manner that renders it clear to the point of being barely visible, making it appear as if the bubbles of carbonation are bouncing off a phantom object. It's served in a Collins glass with an ever-so-thin lip. The fine bubbles and the whisky's subtle maltiness make me want to describe the drink as "refreshing," but it's too sophisticated to be considered in such vague terms.

Later, at TwentyEight, a handsome bar at the posh Conrad Tokyo that looks out onto the city from the 28th floor, I ordered the highball. It appeared with an air of ceremony. Peter Mizutani, who goes by the title "bar captain," brought a tray of items and arranged them on the high table before me: a tall glass filled with dense ice cubes, a bottle of Yamazaki whisky, an individual-size bottle of soda water and a small glass dish of shredded lemon rind. He poured the whisky, then soda, slowly. He told me that in Japan, whisky is commonly consumed as highballs. They're as integral to social situations here as beer is in the



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and bars. Orchard is the kind of place that might have resulted from a brainstorming session among Wes Anderson, Edward Gorey and the Chiwita banana lady. A menagerie of kitschy knickknacks is arranged on the bar. Drinks are served in eye-catching vessels: a mini disco ball, a small metal watering can, a cocktail glass with a pencil-length stem. Sumire and Takuo Miyanojara, the husband-and-wife owners and bartenders, hold court. Sumire pointed out an artfully arranged platter of fruit. That was the menu. Choose one, and they'll custom-design a cocktail. An enticing proposition — and one I would later take advantage of in the form of a persimmon-inspired gin drink — but first, would they make me a highball?

Of course.

With a focus befitting a cardiac surgeon, Takuo rounded the edges of a cube of ice with a pick. He poured a larger-than-standard measure of whisky, which, he explained, marked this a Kobe-style highball. Then he slowly added the entirety of a small bottle of soda water and, without stirring, placed it before me. Tiny bubbles pirouetted and ricocheted off the ice, mingling with the whisky.

But the Stradivarius of highballs is the one we witnessed at Apollo Bar. Hidenori Komatsu, who opened the dim cocktail den in 2013, has always been the sole bartender here. He plays only Tom Waits. Every night. ("It suits the place so well, I don't need anything else,"



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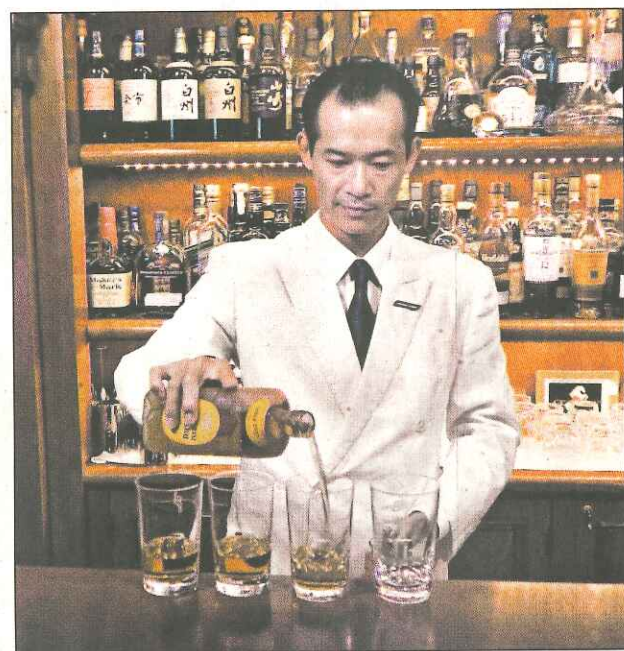
"It's traditional to put whisky and soda together. In a casual atmosphere, this is the way," he told me. "Whisky is strong, but if you're with friends and you want to keep drinking, this lends itself to an easy drink and good atmosphere."

The highball is a riddle of a drink. It's a simple mix of whisky, soda water and ice, but its combinations are infinite. It can be done elaborately, a platform for showmanship and creativity, or get more of a hurried treatment and still be gorgeous.

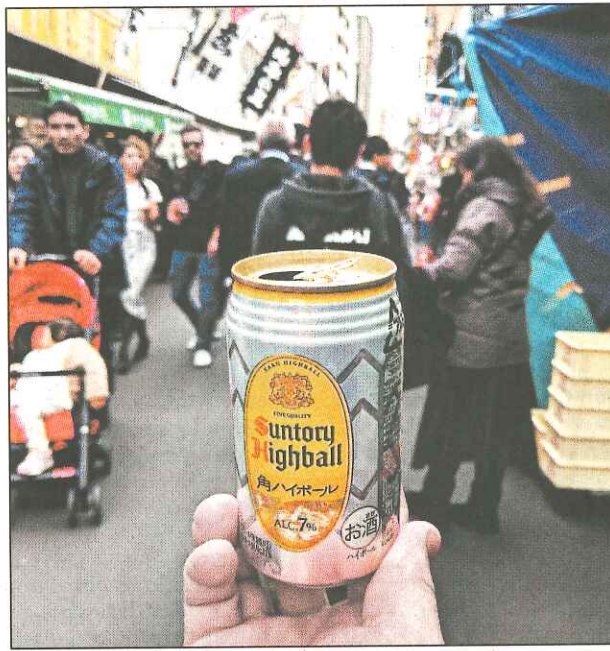
Hurried is the modus operandi at Marugin, an izakaya, Japan's answer to the pub, in Shinbashi, a business district just south of Ginza. The bar, one amid many along the congested sidewalk, is not especially notable: There's a long horseshoe bar in the middle, tall tables around the periphery for standing,



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At a Tokyo location of the Samboa Bar chain, white-jacketed bartenders turn out four or five highballs at a time.



Highballs are so popular in Tokyo that almost all of the abundant convenience stores sell several canned varieties.

paper lanterns and fat HVAC ducts suspended from the ceiling, the hiss of yakitori cooking on a grill. On a Wednesday night in November, it bustled with "salarymen," local jargon for men in suits who go to bars late at night, straight from work.

To accommodate the packed room, highballs are served from a machine, a contraption that's quite ubiquitous now throughout Tokyo. It was designed by Suntory, the Japanese whisky company, and this bar is where, in 2008, the first one was installed. Highballs are served on heavy rotation to the packed crowd in weighty mugs that are said to have been designed for working men's hands. A depression

for the thumb at the top of the handle ensures an easy grip. They're made with Kaku, Suntory's most omnipresent whisky. From no-frills izakayas to swish cocktail shrines, it's so common, particularly for highball-making, that to call for the spirit at a bar is simply another way to ask for a highball.

The highball, which has its roots firmly planted in America, is a broad category that includes the Tom Collins and even the gin and tonic. But in the 1950s, to ramp up Japanese whisky's visibility in a nation then dominated by beer, Suntory, which began making the spirit in the 1920s, introduced the idea of serving it with water in keeping with the Japanese

preference for lower-alcohol drinks. This also made it food-friendly. Nobody ever actually stopped serving highballs in the following decades, but with the company's 2008 introduction of the gizmo that pours whisky and soda together from a familiar, draft-beer-like tap, the trend took off again.

Throughout a week I spent in Tokyo in late fall, it became clear that the highball is every drink for everybody. In a no-frills ramen joint, I ordered one from a ramshackle jukebox-like machine that also lets you select your noodles and broth and serving size. It was delivered moments later to my seat in a traditional hefty mug, poured from the Suntory appara-

tus.

I ordered them at a pocket-size bar in Golden Gai, a boisterous labyrinthine district where there are supposedly more than 200 bars in the many multi-story buildings and alleys behind them.

I ordered highballs at Samboa Bar, a higher-end spot with an old-world vibe. The first one opened in Kyoto in 1918. Now there are 14 throughout Japan. They're known for iceless versions. The rationale, I learned, is that ice changes the drink as it melts. Without it, it's dilution-free.

Mastery is on display at Orchard Bar, another Ginza spot situated up a narrow set of creaky carpeted stairs in a building occupied by other modest restaurants

and bars. Orchard is the kind of place that might have resulted from a brainstorming session among Wes Anderson, Edward Gorey and the Chiquita banana lady. A menagerie of kitschy knickknacks is arranged on the bar. Drinks are served in eye-catching vessels: a mini disco ball, a small metal watering can, a cocktail glass with a pencil-length stem. Sumire and Takuo Miyanojara, the husband-and-wife owners and bartenders, hold court. Sumire pointed out an artfully arranged platter of fruit. That was the menu. Choose one, and they'll custom-design a cocktail. An enticing proposition — and one I would later take advantage of in the form of a persimmon-inspired gin drink — but first, would they make me a highball?

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There's an ancient Japanese philosophy called wabi-sabi, best translated as the beauty of imperfection. The pursuit of perfection is innate to artists and craftspeople here, but to reach it, the philosophy goes, is dangerous and an offense to the gods. Not to attempt it, though, is also an offense. But in that moment, drinking from a razor-thin-lipped glass as minuscule bubbles carried whisky flavors and Waits sang his raspy yet ethereal dirges, perfection seemed tangible.