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TRAVEL

In whisky-loving Tokyo, the highball is a top-shelf drink

BY LIZA WEISSTUCH

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 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 next to a pair of calla lilies: 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. The skyline twinkled in the background. We chatted about his passion for collecting whisky and visiting distilleries. 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 United States and aperitifs are in Italy.

“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. It’s very relaxed.”

The highball is a riddle of a drink. It’s a simple mix of whisky, soda water and ice, but its combinations are infinite. Ice shape and density, glassware, the water’s carbonation intensity and minerality, the kind of whisky, the proportions, preparation process, and presentation all matter. Thing is, when something is so simple, there’s no room for error. There’s nothing to conceal a flaw. Simplicity is the drink’s magnificence and its vulnerability. And, like Coco Chanel’s Little Black Dress or Thelonious Monk’s “Round Midnight,” it’s the attribute that makes the highball so eternal, so universal, so open to variation. 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 Shinjuku, 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, 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 “salary men,” 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 drinking 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. So much so that in 2018 Suntory introduced the machines on these shores, a year after it launched Toki, a whisky intended for American highballs. (Kaku isn’t sold in the United States.) At present, there are more than 70 machines in bars in 25 cities throughout the country, spanning San Jose to San Francisco in California, as well as in the District and Denver.

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 apparatus. 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 multistoried buildings and alleys behind them. My friend and I found ourselves at one where thin strips of dried fish are served with every drink. It was a comfortable place, the kind where a regular, a friend of the bartender, arrived from a gig with a guitar that he broke out to play Creedence Clearwater Revival and Tom Petty tunes when he learned we were Americans. Within minutes, the young crew turned the moment into a full-blown hootenanny. 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



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: At Apollo Bar in Tokyo, Hidenori Komatsu’s highball preparation involves dancelike grace and precision, under a spotlight, with Tom Waits songs playing on repeat. The whisky-and-soda drinks are so popular in Japan that convenience stores sell several canned varieties. Suntory’s first highball machine was introduced at Marugin.

ice changes the drink as it melts. Without it, it’s dilution-free. Here is where a bartender in a crisp, white jacket lined up four glasses and poured the ingredients in quick succession. He worked in the Kyoto location for 10 years, he told me, over which time he learned from a much more seasoned bartender how to perfect his pour.

At one point, bartenders who elevated the highball to an art form were few and far between. But with the growth of cocktail culture, that changed. I was traveling with my friend Jake Norris, a Denver-based distiller and consultant who dabbles in cooking, pickling, watercolors and knife-forging. The notion of craftsmanship is not an ultimate achievement, it’s an incremental process, it’s about learning by mastering the nuances. Highballs are nothing if not process. And the simpler the product, the harder the work.

“Simplicity is the absolute expression of mastery,” Jake noted one day while we watched an ice-pick-wielding bartender aggressively transform a dense ice cube into a sphere. “Being able to take basic ingredients and assemble them into something astounding is mark of mastery. Any artist has access to the same tools and materials. The touch of the master’s hand is what creates something special, something with subtlety.”

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 Miyano, 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 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. The smoother the ice, he

explained, the less loss of carbonation; the more carbonation, the more the better the whisky is integrated. 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. Still life with motion.

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 only plays Tom Waits. Every night. (“It suits the place so well, I don’t need anything else,” he told me.) He wears a black silk button-down shirt with a black vest, and has precision engineered his method for making highballs. It starts with him flicking a switch to turn on a spotlight, transforming the bar into a stage. With that, the choreography begins: a hand-chiseled, coffin-shaped ice block goes into a crystal glass so thin that it yields to pressure. He dramatically flaps a bamboo fan over the ice to liquefy the surface with and prevent microfractures on contact with the room-temperature liquids. When ice cracks, bubbles find their way in and carbonation diminishes, Komatsu-San explained. Carbonation is the delivery system for whisky’s rich flavors. Temperature is crucial, too, he said. Colder liquid holds carbonation better.

“I learned from a master and studied, studied,” he said. “Maybe I’ll make the best drink some day. At the moment I’m making the best I can, but there’s always room for improvement.”

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.

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