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BAR REVIEW: SAD CAFÉ

by Nicholas Coldicott



What's in a name? Not much maybe, but you wouldn't call your bar Sad Cafe, would you? It sounds about as enticing as "The Pickled Liver" for a night out, evoking scenes of lonely hearts, drowning sorrows and Leonard Cohen.

Yet owner/designer/architect Hideo Horikawa chose exactly this woeful name for his Ogikubo bar. It's inapt. The only food here comes in finger bowls for an obligatory ¥500, so it's technically a bar rather than cafe. And sad? Well they do play Tom Waits but it's more demure than depressing. Think upmarket shot bar. Think whiskey over beer, sipping over slamming, and schmoozing more than boozing. The lonelyheart barflies suggested by the name are actually laid-back locals winding down from work. They come for the spot-on service—friendly and inviting but never in-your-face.

But there's more here than alcohol and chit-chat. Tucked into the plainest building just a block away from Ogikubo's sparkle-free



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main drag, Sad Cafe is a designer's playground. The entrance sets the tone with a grand cocooning window, while inside a tousled mess of steel pipes swirl from the floor like Medusa's hair threatening to behead any lanky punters whose wits disappear with their whiskey. Even the functional basics get the architectural once-over, with underlit tables illuminating your sauce and a Japanese rock garden for a wash basin. There's also the most peculiar turntable ever produced (an abstract tangle of metal nothing like your old man's belt-drive) and a pair of space-age helmets for speakers—all the handiwork of Horikawa. The music embraces every strain of mellow, from Billie Holiday to Ben Harper. Requests are welcome, but don't go looking for speed garage or nu-school breaks.

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The booze, like everything else here, picks quality over quantity with a limited but well-chosen stock. Porfidio and small-batch bourbon sit where the Cuervo and Jack Daniels should be. But if the mellow setting doesn't convince you to sip, the prices might. At ¥1,000 a cocktail or ¥800 for the draft Heineken there are cheaper watering holes in town, but you get what you pay for. Cocktails come strong and classy; kahlua with creme instead of milk, ice as perfect spheres.

Still wondering about that gloomy name? It was lifted not from the Carson McCullers' "Ballad of the Sad Café" but an old Eagles' tune of the same name (well it's better than "Chug All Night" or "Wasted Time") but really, if you live anywhere near Ogikubo, this bar, by some other name, could be the classiest place around.

**3-10-17 Tennuma, Suginami-ku. Open daily
7pm-1am. tel: 03-3220-7252. Nearest stn:
Ogikubo.**

Photo credit: Kiely Ramos

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