

# hidden kyoto

# rakushou

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Almost every *Lonely Planet*-clutching tourist who comes to Kyoto will find themselves on the trail through Higashiyama that takes in Yasaka Shrine, Maruyama Park, *Nene no Michi* ("Nene's Path") and Kiyomizu Temple. On the way they'll pass and perhaps notice **Rakushou**, with its spectacular koi pond and landscaping, but relatively few will stop in for a bite. It's possible to live in Kyoto for a long while and assume that Rakushou is, like a lot of Kyoto townhouses, too exclusive to allow the hoi-polloi in to spoil the *tatami*. However, it is not only home to one of the most beautiful gardens in any Kyoto café: it's also very reasonably priced to boot.

One enters the café and is immediately ushered outside again. But there's no need to take umbrage at that. This is an opportunity for you to enjoy a stroll around Rakushou's small but beautifully formed Japanese-style garden, which features a pond replete with arched bridge and spectacular koi carp. This is a narrow garden, which is typical of Kyoto townhouses as rent used to be calculated according to building width, but a truly spectacular example of Japanese design. As the Rakushou website puts it:

*"Take a little break from Nene no Michi. While you gaze at Rakushou's garden enjoy some Kusa Warabi Mochi and green tea to quiet your soul. In our garden pond you'll find coloured koi carp swim around peacefully to ease your tiredness. In the spring of 1998 two wild ducks settled here and before long two ducklings were born. The male was named Kyotaro and the female Miyako. To date over a hundred ducklings have been born and adopted by interested parties all over Japan."*

When you've had enough of the gardens, approach the sliding doors at the side of the building, remove your shoes outside on the small stone step and then climb up into the *washitsu*. Once inside you'll notice a large collection of trophies, each topped with a golden representation of a koi carp, that attest to the fact that these are fish of a prize-winning standard. Take a knee at one of the tables overlooking the beautiful gardens and help yourself to a menu.

Rakushou's website recommends the *Grass Warabi Mochi*, and who are we to disagree? The "grass" in the name is actually green tea, and the *warabi mochi* is a jelly-like confection made from bracken starch covered or dipped in *kinako*. The sensation is not unlike eating a powdery cube of Turkish Delight off a toothpick. It is a favorite summertime snack, especially in the Kansai region, and goes deliciously with a cup of powdered green tea. A word of warning: try not to inhale with a cube of *warabi mochi* in your mouth, because you could find yourself dusting the resulting cough out of the eyebrows of your companions before you've had a chance to swallow...

The powdered Japanese green tea, when whisked into a froth, has a deliciously thick consistency and a refreshing taste reminiscent of spinach (in a good way). Prices for standard Rakushou menu items are as follows: coffee, ¥450; iced coffee, ¥500; green tea, ¥500; green tea float, ¥750; *sōmen* (thin noodles eaten cold in the summer), ¥700.

Although you might consider this overkill in a standard café, here are some words of advice for drinking green tea in Japan:

1. In a nice tea shop the server will often bow to you after she places your table, and it would be polite for you to do likewise.
2. One holds one's bowl in two hands, the left supporting the base and the right wrapped around the side as if strangling a giraffe.
3. One holds the bowl aloft and admires the flourish painted on the near side of the bowl. If it's absent, one is expected to imagine it's there.
4. One should then turn the bowl 180 degrees so that said design focal point (imagined or otherwise) is not near your mouth as you partake.
5. Having slurped the last dregs of powder from the bowl as if sucking up *ramen*, one may wipe the drinking edge of the bowl, turn it back so that the design is facing you, place it on the table once more, and spend some time appreciating it.
6. The tea itself doesn't vary much throughout the year, but as in all art it's the negative spaces which define the piece, so the pottery and cake vary to reflect and amplify the season and change one's appreciation of the tea. Failure to appreciate the setting, vessel and other details is tantamount to missing the point [*And a waste of money.* - Ed].
7. The sweet dish/cake which is served first should be finished before the tea is begun. One uses the small, flat-edged stick to slice, spear and eat the cake first, rather than eating it "with" the tea. The qualities of this seasonally specific morsel should then add to the tea in some way.

## Rakushou

(Left of the entrance to Kodaiji)  
Kodaiji Kitamon-dori Sagaru, Kawahara Higashi-iru  
Washio-cho 516, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto

Opening hours: 09:30-18:30  
No holidays, no parking

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