

lifestyle

What does Jimbocho think of its unexpected 'cool' status?

Neighborhood's residents weigh in on recent Time Out designation

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Known for its secondhand bookstores and curry shops, Jimbocho hasn't traditionally topped tourists' lists—but that could soon change. Time Out magazine recently declared the area the "world's coolest neighborhood"—much to the surprise of Tokyoites.

"I'm very happy, but it was unexpected," says Michiaki Kamoshida, a bookseller at Honmaru, a shared bookstore where individuals or corporations rent a bookshelf and curate their own collection. "Books aren't really getting that much attention these days, even globally. Especially in Japan, the publishing industry isn't doing that well. So I was very surprised to see this book town getting attention."

He is not alone in his bemusement. "Jimbocho isn't a big neighborhood," says Akiko Nabeto, deputy manager at Bumpodo, an art supply store founded in the area in 1887. "It only takes about 10 to 20 minutes to walk around it. It's amazing that it's No. 1."

While the growing number of internet listicles and attention-grabbing headlines have been known to lift a cynical eyebrow or two, there's no doubt that the neighborhood exudes a certain retro charm, offering a window into the past but also opening the door to something new.

Time Out Tokyo & Osaka Deputy Editor Ili Saanenin was part of the team that nominated Jimbocho for the global list. "Jimbocho has, of course, long been the top area for Tokyo's bookish crowd and it has retained its distinctive vibe wonderfully in a city where change is the only constant," Saanenin said in an email to The Japan Times. "But the neighborhood now appears to be reinventing itself from the ground up with an influx of new, independent businesses from music clubs to artisanal cafes and hidden bars, quietly turning into an alternative nightlife destination."

A visitor exiting Jimbocho Station onto the main thoroughfare of Yasukuni Street

will find the south side lined with second-hand bookstores. Most have piles and stacks of their offerings outside, creating an overall effect that is part-shopping street, part-museum of an analog era. The area is also home to countless curry stores— from Japanese to Sri Lankan—and coffee shops for every taste and mood. Saboru, a 70-year-old retro *kissaten* (cafe) popular for its pizza toast, is only a stone's throw from newcomers Cafe Ataraxia, playing classical music on a gramophone, and Dill Coffee Parlor, which serves one of the best carrot cakes in town.

A book town with deep roots

Tatsuro Watanabe, a professor at Senshu University's School of Commerce, studies the formation and transformation of Tokyo's bookstore district. He says it's important to understand the neighborhood's diversity.

"The town is home to a kind of ecosystem. People live here, work here and study here. Besides books, there are restaurants, cafes, galleries and other cultural spaces," Watanabe says. "At first glance, it may look like it hasn't changed for a hundred years, but if you look closely, it's constantly changing."

Jimbocho's identity as a book town took shape in the late 1800s, when the rise of nearby universities spurred demand for textbooks and secondhand titles. This led bookstores and publishers to set up shop nearby. As the area's reputation grew, the cluster of stores continued to grow. Many bookstores specialized in a particular field, leading to friendly cooperation and producing a kind of "mutually supportive relationship" that Watanabe says has only grown stronger in the postwar years.

This relationship may now become even more important as bookstores face intense competition from the online marketplace. So far, Jimbocho has managed to buck the nationwide trend of decline. Booksellers in the area have come together to promote the book image of the town. Some of these efforts started decades ago—the Kanda Secondhand Book Festival marks its 65th edition this autumn and features about 100 participating shops, hundreds of wagons crammed with books, and large on-street sales that bring massive footfall to the area.

A more recent initiative is Nihon no Furuho-yu, an online platform for used bookstores founded by the Tokyo Association of Dealers in Old Books that connects shops all over Japan and allows users to see what's available and where. "For customers, this is a huge improvement," Watanabe says. "Many second-hand bookstores are small with stock scattered across warehouses, so having everything digitally cataloged is very convenient."

Stores in Jimbocho also face the same threats of online shopping and remote work

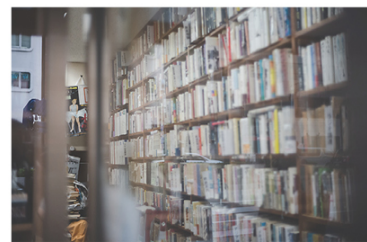


that are overshadowing city centers globally, creating an acute need to offer services and experiences that draw people to spend time in an area. New stores in Jimbocho are increasingly embracing diversification and a multipurpose approach. For example, Stacks, an independent book and zine store focused on street culture, also has a small bar serving craft beer and hosts fashion pop-ups. Then, there's Yon, which offers curry on its first floor, an art gallery on the second floor and a listening room and DJ event space in its basement.

Both exude an abundance of cool but they also build on the community feel of the neighborhood; Jimbocho has a reputation for being warm and welcoming. Newcomer Tomoko Miyamae runs a "femtech" store that was denied rental space in multiple locations after several landlords refused to rent to her because her product lineup includes sex toys for women. She was finally granted a bright corner spot in Jimbocho. "I really like the people here," she says. "I interact with the locals. The elderly residents, for example, greet me when they pass by. I think everyone kind of knows each other's faces, and I like the homely, familiar atmosphere."

Change on the horizon

There are fears, however, that Jimbocho's distinct character might not last forever. The pace of turnover of store ownership is increasing, as is the rent. Not only are developers eyeing prime real estate but, as Watanabe notes, redevelopment of the area is necessary, with many of the postwar buildings not meeting modern earthquake safety regulations.



Locals aren't staying quiet about how this will play out—and this community spirit is another reason the neighborhood won over the Time Out team. Longtime residents remain concerned, though, with some complaining about insufficient explanations and involvement in the planning process.

Watanabe is also wary of imagining a notion of a cohesive neighborhood mission. "People here are quite independent-minded. They don't tend to unite as one large group with a single leader," he says. "Instead, there are many leaders—the town is divided into multiple overlapping communities. Even among the secondhand bookstores, some are closely connected while others operate independently."

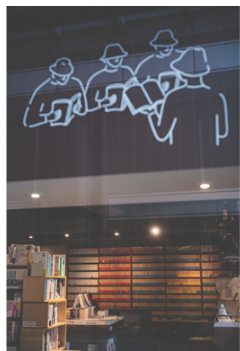
United or not, there are strong feelings among locals regarding preserving the area. "As someone who was born and raised here, I care deeply about the neighborhood and I'm very happy that many people have

come to know about it," says Rika Kitazawa, the fourth-generation owner of Kitazawa Books, which specializes in rare titles from abroad. "If we can all work together to protect this culture, I think we can pass it on to the next generation."

Jimbocho's strength lies in its whole. While the books provide the greatest draw, the area's other stores, restaurants, bars and cafes come together to make a thriving neighborhood.

"There are 150 stores (here), but each has its specialty, so we can think of the neighborhood as a kind of department store," says Yoshiko Imamoto, president of Book House Cafe, which specializes in children's books. Given the original Japanese word for department is *hyakkaten*—literally, "100 goods shop"—it's an apt analogy. Moreover, Imamoto's Book House Cafe epitomizes a bookstore that provides experiences not available at home or on a screen. Cafe seats fill the center floor, with low-rise bookshelves lining either side and offering visibility of both books and people. The entrance and backroom act as a gallery for original artworks from the children's books on sale. Then, at night, when the store shuts for the day, the lights switch on in a tiny five-seat bar accessible only through the back door from the narrower street behind.

Jimbocho is a neighborhood that promises and delivers an element of discovery on each visit, whether through its stores, cafes or people. It invites serendipitous encounters—and, in an era where so much is meticulously planned and relegated to screens, what could be cooler than that?



Nakatsu keeps its cool as gentrification looms

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Once something is dubbed cool, it is often just a matter of time before it ceases to be so. Ranked No. 8 on Time Out's "world's coolest neighborhoods" list, Nakatsu in Osaka has gained international attention—but locals worry its distinctive character faces a greater threat than fleeting fame.

Home to a population of little more than 10,000 and crisscrossed between two train lines and the Yodo River, you'd be forgiven for never having heard of or been to Nakatsu.

But it is undeniable that the area has charm.

Tatsuya Ono, who has lived and worked here for 11 years and owns Kitanaga—a mixed-use space that is home to restaurants, galleries and tourist accommodation—notes that it is conveniently close to central Osaka. Despite this, the area is quiet, lived-in

and full of an eclectic mix of businesses.

"There are many unique, independently run small shops," he says. "And despite being right next to Umeda, Osaka's busiest district, Nakatsu mixes the old and the new, and many people find its local atmosphere appealing."

Katsumi Toyofuku, a designer whose firm, Alligator Inc., is based in Nakatsu, agrees. "Many people are taking on new projects, and the area has become an exciting place where the old and new coexist," he says.

This harmony is visible along the main shopping street, where a sweets shop, always busiest after school, sits opposite a modern architect's office; a community center neighbors an art gallery; and the newer bars and restaurants are matched in number by traditional taverns and cafes.

It goes without saying that Nakatsu wasn't always the neighborhood it is now.

In the early 20th century, Nakatsu was a peripheral suburb that provided essential but unsightly services—crematoriums, cemeteries, tanneries—and was known for

its slums and *buraku* community, a social minority ostracized over centuries. During World War II, that neglect was its biggest asset. Despite being so close to the infrastructure of Umeda, the area survived the bombing of Osaka largely unscathed.

That left a kind of neighborhood that had otherwise been destroyed across Osaka. By the 21st century, it became a haven for young proprietors seeking cheap rent and space.

One was of this generation. His business, Kitanaga, is in a row of eight old houses that he renovated in 2018. He says that since then, the initiative to revitalize the *shotengai* and an influx of new businesses has revived the area.

"The number of attractive independently run shops has been increasing year by year," he says, "and even the Nakatsu shopping street, which had once become lined with shuttered shops, has regained its energy."

Shunsuke Takahashi, owner of the cafe Hood by Vargas, agrees. "About seven years ago, it was a very quiet residential area lined with old houses and *izakaya* (pubs), but now

there are more new shops making use of old buildings, and the town feels much brighter and calmer."

Wandering through Nakatsu, the impact of the change is clear. Having survived the war, the area became a prime site for renovation and is now a hub of independent shops that blend community and creativity.

Residents worry its next test—redevelopment—may be harder to survive. In the past two decades, neighboring districts have undergone extensive transformation, with the former railway yards north of Umeda turned into the Grand Front, western Japan's largest shopping center. To the east, Nakazakicho—a neighborhood with a nearly identical history to Nakatsu and, until recently, a similar reputation as one of Osaka's trendier neighborhoods—has seen its traditional architecture slowly replaced by high-rises. Many in Nakatsu see a direct link between the capital going into those areas and their character.

Hiroko Suzuki, operations manager of Osaka Food Lab, a food court in the arches of



Shunsuke Takahashi, owner of the cafe Hood by Vargas, says the Osaka neighborhood of Nakatsu feels brighter and calmer with the influx of new businesses.

EDWARD HEWES

the Hankyu Kyoto Line, says Nakatsu is cool exactly because it hasn't seen much outside investment yet.

"Despite being in the center of Osaka, large corporate capital hasn't entered yet," she says, adding that its character comes from the fact "it hasn't been overly tampered with."

Takahashi says he is worried about the impact of redevelopment on the area, while Ono believes it has already begun.

"The wave of redevelopment has already

reached Nakatsu, and with tenant rents rising, some independent shops have been forced to relocate as a result," Ono says. "If we want to see these appealing small businesses continue to thrive here, I think they'll need to strengthen their staying power accordingly."

So far, Nakatsu has balanced old and new to build an identity worthy of international recognition. Whether it can keep that balance will determine if it stays deserving of its recent accolade.