

Tetsuya Yamashita tries to “see everything, remember everything, detect everything, and guess some things but stay quiet about them.”

# Waiting with Distinction

RYUSUKE HAYASHI



RYUSUKE HAYASHI

Yamashita serves between 50 and 150 parties each day at Café de Flore.

*Among other things, Paris is well known for its cafés. We take a look at a Japanese garçon working at one such Parisian café.*

Café de Flore, which first opened in 1885, is a well-established café that has enjoyed popularity among a host of writers and artists, among them Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Serge Gainsbourg.

A Café de Flore garçon (the word, which is French for “waiter,” has entered the English language) dressed in a white shirt, black vest, black bow tie and white *tablier* (apron) carries a tray holding coffee, wine and a *croque-monsieur* (a grilled ham and cheese sandwich) as he threads his way between the tables to serve an order with elegance. It was at such a sight that Sartre once remarked, “The garçons of Flore are actors, who each day act the part of Flore waiters on the stage that is Flore.”

Café de Flore garçons’ earnings come solely from the tables on which they wait. They receive 15% of the cost

of drinks at their tables, plus tips. Today, few cafés still employ this commission-based wage system. Without a fixed wage, the garçons of Flore truly battle it out on their own. Unless you possess all manner of skills, including the stamina to continue working for more than ten hours each day, the receptiveness to quickly pick up on what a guest wants and the intellect to delight guests in conversation, you will not make it as a garçon at Café de Flore.

It is among the twenty full-time garçons who represent Paris as they work at the café that we find the lone foreigner, Tetsuya Yamashita.

"I embrace the motto, 'faster, stronger and more beautiful' and strive to deliver service that excites the senses of customers," says Yamashita.

Yamashita first became interested in becoming a garçon during university when he worked part time at the Omotesando branch of Café de Flore in Tokyo. He eventually came to dream of working at the original Café de Flore in Paris, and traveled to France in 2002. Then, in the summer of 2003 he became a part-time garçon at Café de Flore, and in 2005 was selected as the first non-French full-time garçon in the café's history.

"There was some prejudice: 'a Japanese person can't possibly be a garçon at a café.' Because of that, I've been working as a garçon with the resolve to represent Japan with distinction," says Yamashita.

This has won Yamashita much support, including from the café's manager, his fellow garçons and many customers. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, almost every café regular called him over to ask if his family was okay.

"I went around feeling touched by people's love,"

recounts Yamashita.

Yamashita serves between 50 and 150 parties each day. He draws on all of his senses to pick up on customer movements and deliver service with economy. For example, for customers who smoke, he instantly determines where on the table an ashtray should be placed. Even after finishing a day's work, Yamashita remembers every order received from customers that day. "See everything, remember everything, detect everything, and guess some things but stay quiet about them." With this, Yamashita ex-



Yamashita greets a regular customer.

RYUSUKE HAYASHI

presses the secret to being a garçon.

"As the successor to one of France's cultural assets, and as an envoy conveying the true wonder of cafés to Japan, I hope to work as a garçon my whole life," says Yamashita.

