

The Sixth Annual Kyoto Writing Competition

THIRD PRIZE:

“Restaurant Boer” by Hans Brinckmann

These were the judges’ comments:

‘This was a lovely and generous narrative, full of interesting details about the first Dutch restaurant in Kyoto, and told with humor and warmth. The judges felt that the author was right there, telling us his personal story. While there were cultural factors in the enterprise which caused confusion, it was a delight to see that there was a happy ending after all. It is the imagery of the bridge at the end that makes this brief tale so engaging. A restaurant may have gone by the wayside only to make way for a lifelong partnership.’

Here is the full text of the story:

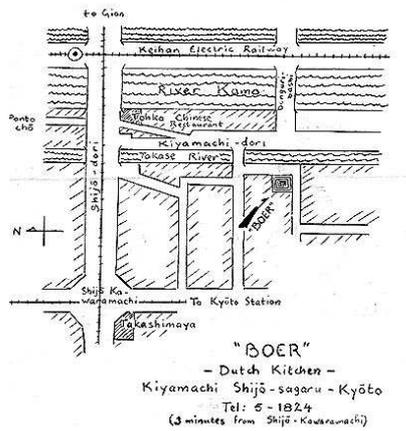
“Restaurant Boer”

In the spring of 1958, I assisted a close friend, Shoko Fujii, in setting up a small Kyoto eatery in Kiyamachi, Shijo-sagaru, in a rented space owned by a gynecologist, right on the narrow Takasegawa. From the options I offered, she chose the name Restaurant Boer (meaning Farmer), the first Dutch restaurant in Kyoto, if not in Japan. It featured smoked eels, hearty soups, and – as the house specialty – very tasty veal-and-bacon rolls known in Holland as ‘blinde vinken’, blind finches. The approximate translation, *mekura-no-suzume*, blind sparrows, sounded so intriguing that we were sure this would guarantee the success of this start-up. Besides fresh vegetables, they were served with potatoes, *jaga-imo* in Japanese, introduced by 17th century Dutch traders from the Indonesian capital Jakarta, *jagatara* in old-Japanese, thus named *jaga-imo*, *imo* meaning tuber. Other meals were also served, such as cheese dishes and Jachtschotel, a hunter’s stew.

But after a brief spell of bookings, customer numbers declined fast, perhaps in part because of the shock caused by the *mekura-no-suzume*, not the taste, but its appetite-destroying name. And the term Boer didn’t help either: what was a “farmer restaurant” doing in Japan’s sophisticated, ancient capital? The restaurant closed its doors within a year.

But at least there was a happy ending: it was in front of Boer that in

October 1958 I was introduced in *mi-ai* style to my future wife, Toyoko Yoshida. Why “in front”? Because although we had planned to meet at Boer, a funeral procession had just crossed the bridge to Boer. “Bad omen!”, she called out. “I avoid that bridge!” Instead, I crossed to her side, and from then on, everything went well. We clicked, found common interests, and married four months later. We had a happy marriage.



Location of Restaurant Boer (1958)



Hans in front of Boer’s old location (photo taken in 2010)



Blind finches – Mekura-no-suzume