

Restaurants and teahouses with *nouryou-yuka*, viewed over the Kamogawa river in Kyoto City at dusk  
Photo: Courtesy of Tratto Brain

# Nouryou-Yuka

## A Kyoto Summer Tradition

Enjoy a meal or drink tea beside the Kamogawa river in Kyoto while feeling the cool breeze and watching the water flow by. We introduce a summer cultural tradition that offers a relaxing experience for both Kyoto residents and visitors alike.

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The *nouryou-yuka* wooden decks look out over the Kamogawa river toward the Higashiyama mountains  
Photo: Courtesy of Tratto Brain

THE *nouryou-yuka* which line the bank of the Kamogawa river that flows through the city of Kyoto are a seasonal tradition that adds style to the summer.

Nouryou-yuka are raised wooden decks with tatami mat seating overlooking the river that restaurants and *chaya* teahouses<sup>i</sup> set up in the summer, allowing customers to cool down outside while enjoying a meal or drinking tea.

Tanaka Hiroshi, representative director of the Kyoto Kamogawa Nouryou-Yuka Cooperative Association, has this to say about nouryou-yuka.

“Many places in Kyoto have become modernized, but the scenery along the Kamogawa river remains much the same as in the old Kyoto. The raised wooden seating decks looking out over the river let you enjoy the natural breeze while listening to the flow of the river and viewing the lush green of the thirty-six peaks of Higashiyama. One of the true pleasures of the seating decks is that they enable visitors to get a sense of the natural environment of Kyoto, which has been described as the city of purple hills and crystal streams.”

Long ago there were large sandbanks in the Kamogawa river. Theaters and *chaya* teahouses were built on these sandbanks because of their proximity to the Yasaka Shrine, which attracted many visitors during the annual Gion Festival<sup>ii</sup>. In the late sixteenth century, *chaya* teahouses and merchants set up wooden fold-up stools for their customers on these sandbanks in the river. This is said to be the origins of the nouryou-yuka. In the late seventeenth century, as a flood-prevention measure, the sand was dredged from the Kamogawa river and the sandbanks were removed. Embankments were then constructed along both banks of the river close to where the nouryou-yuka stand today. On these embankments, nouryou-yuka decks raised on stilts were constructed, and in the summer the riverbanks and shallows became packed full of wooden fold-up stools lined up like benches. These scenes were depicted in many ukiyo-e woodblock prints, and the *Miyako meisho zue* series of prints, which introduced famous places in Kyoto, led to the summer tradition of nouryou-yuka becoming known throughout Japan. However, in the Meiji period (1868-1912), setting up nouryou-yuka using wooden fold-up stools on riverbanks and shallows was banned as flood-prevention construction work continued. Nouryou-yuka raised decks took their place, but could not be constructed on the east bank of the Kamogawa river owing to the construction there of a canal and railroad. As a result, nouryou-yuka decks raised on stilts are only to be found on the west bank of the Kamogawa, between Nijo-dori and Gojo-dori.

Today, nouryou-yuka are not only occupied by Japanese restaurants serving *Kyo-kaiseki* (traditional Kyoto cuisine), but there are also many bars and other establishments serving

Italian, French, Chinese, Thai and Korean cuisine. In 2006, they were joined by the coffee-house chain Starbucks. The nouryou-yuka may have changed with the times, but respect for this Kyoto tradition remains strong.

“Rules have been drawn up to prevent any establishment spoiling the visual appearance of the nouryou-yuka,” says Tanaka. “For example, deck floors must be of a uniform height, be designed in a Japanese style as much as possible, and *sudare* screens only should be used to separate the establishments using the decks. Cultural traditions have rules and I believe that some places can only be enjoyed if those rules are followed. The nouryou-yuka is one such cultural tradition.

“The operating period has been from May to the end of September, but with more establishments serving lunch in recent times, we are extending it by one month to the end of October



Kyo-kaiseki, traditional Kyoto cuisine  
Photo: Courtesy of KASSAI

this year. Of course, we are taking all necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 based on public health center guidance. We are preserving tradition while at the same time adapting to the modern age when tradition no longer serves the needs of the times. I would like to preserve the nouryou-yuka as a classic Kyoto tradition to be enjoyed by many people of all ages.”

Nouryou-yuka has been flexible in adapting to the times while observing tradition. That’s why since the seventeenth century it has drawn many people of all ages and nationalities in search of “cool.” 🍷

i *Chaya* are small venues for entertaining guests. These establishments do not prepare full meals. Instead, food is brought in by caterers (restaurants that specialize in on-site cooking).

ii One of Japan’s three major festivals. The festival is held annually in July at the Gion and Yasaka Shrines in Kyoto. It began in 869 as an appeal to the gods to suppress a plague that was spreading through the city.