

# Boxed Lunches

By Takashima Hatsuhsa

Since assuming my post as a Director of the United Nations Information Center in Tokyo in September 2000, I've been able to savor once again a pleasure that I had nearly forgotten. I am referring to the boxed lunches enjoyed while traveling, especially those sold at train stations.

Before joining the United Nations staff, I was in charge of overseas news coverage as a journalist for a television network in Japan. Consequently, a business trip for me usually meant traveling overseas and in particular during my past years on the job, it meant that two or three times every month I found myself heading overseas from Narita, the New Tokyo International Airport. But recently, I have virtually stopped traveling overseas, and instead I have increasingly traveled to various cities and towns around Japan to give speeches about the United Nations.

The narrow Japanese Archipelago stretches north to south over 3,000 km, and because the capital city, Tokyo, is located almost exactly in the middle, within two or three hours by air or *Shinkansen* bullet train it is possible to reach any domestic destination.

During the past year or so, I have had domestic travels on business several times each month. As a result, I have developed a thorough knowledge of the domestic airport and train stations in Tokyo area, and can tell you where the various types of shops and restaurants are, and which is the shortest path to the gates and platforms. In contrast, my knowledge of the facilities at Narita airport – which is given over entirely to international flights – is now out of date, and I have forgotten the pleasures of international flights, particularly the different in-flight meals.

However, more than offsetting that particular loss is a joy I have gained:



American-produced boxed lunches sell at a low price in Japan

boxed lunches, especially the *ekiben* (station boxed lunches) that are inseparably bound up with railroad travel in Japan. Every major station along Japanese railroads has its own boxed lunch in which are arranged the local specialties. It is said that there are 2,500-3,000 different kinds of *ekiben* in this country. In addition, on board the trains, carts loaded with assortments of good things to eat and drink constantly circulate up and down the aisles. It is not going to far to say that train travel in Japan is an “epicurean journey.”

When I travel on business within Japan, and have the options of going by air or by rail, even if it may take one or two hours longer, I often choose to go by train. Let me give a recent trip to Osaka as an example. It is 560 km between Tokyo and Osaka. By plane, it takes an hour. By the fastest *Shinkansen*, it takes two and a half hours. The plane arrives a little earlier, but I still select the train. Needless to say, the reason for choosing the slower method of travel was because I wanted to eat a boxed lunch on board. My lecture in Osaka that day was to start at 3 p.m. In the morning, I went to the office to tend to several matters, then headed to Tokyo Station, arriving there a little after 11 a.m., and at shops in the

station bought a boxed lunch and some tea in a plastic bottle. My purchase on this occasion was an “O-bento,” the American-produced boxed lunch that has recently been in the news. I then boarded the 11:30 *Nozomi Superexpress*. While I glanced through the newspaper and looked over my notes, Mt. Fuji came into view out of the window. It was after noon, time for lunch. When I looked around, I could see that almost everyone was beginning to eat whatever midday meal they had with them. There were home-made boxed lunches. There was

food bought from the vendor’s cart that plied back and forth through the train car. There were boxed lunches bought at the station prior to departure. These meals were large and small, and came in many varieties.

Among them, the American “O-bento” whose lid I lifted was the most fashionable.

In Japan, imports of rice are strictly limited, and rice brought in from other countries is taxed at a very high rate. However, this American-produced boxed lunch makes use of the exception to the Japanese law which states that if the accompanying ingredients are greater in quantity than the rice itself, it is exempt from duty. By using American rice, preparing the other ingredients and bringing it into Japan as a complete frozen meal, it is possible to significantly reduce costs. While Japanese-made boxed lunches are ¥800 to ¥1,000 each, the “O-bento” is only ¥600. The latter comes in several varieties, including spicy beef *sukiyaki*, chicken-and-burdock *teriyaki*, and one topped with salmon.

When this American boxed lunch went on sale at stations in July 2001, something unexpected happened. The so-called *Norin-zoku*, members of the national Diet who are supported by

agricultural (*norin*) bodies, sought to prevent sales of these lunches, saying, "It is unforgivable to use foreign-grown rice in ekiben." If it had been prior to 1982 – the year in which the railroads were privatized – such political pressure would have been effective. The reason was that the railroads at that time were national entities, and even the items sold in the shops in the stations were subject to political pressure. The Norin-zoku group of representatives protested, as if they were back in the old days, saying, "Use domestic rice for ekiben! It is outrageous to use rice from America!" However, since the privatization of the railroads, such political pressure has lost potency. "O-bento" went on sale without challenge, to compete with the other ekiben sold at shops and stands in Tokyo Station. On this particular trip, I chose the chicken-and-burdock boxed lunch. It was nicely flavored and tasted delicious. There are a number of "O-bento" fans among my friends. Those of us who are conscious of our weight find the small-size ¥320 lunches to be particularly enjoyable.

My enjoyment was doubled when I returned to Osaka Station after my speech. I had some extra time before my train departed, so I decided to further relish my boxed-lunch journey. The key word in this instance is "*depachika*," a Japanese contraction of "*depato*" and "*chika*" meaning the basement of a department store which is given over to food in its various forms. The major stations of Japan's railroads are built side-by-side with department stores. The basement of these stores is filled to overflowing with the edible delights of this world, a paradise on earth for gourmets and gourmands alike. Step inside and the large number of boxed lunches competing for your attention will absolutely astound you. There are specially prepared boxed lunches featuring ingredients from the local area, standard *makunouchi* lunches (rice and a variety of ingredients delightfully arranged), Western-style lunches, Chinese-style lunches, and even Indian and Italian varieties. After finding the boxed lunch that looked like a jewel box full



*Although it might seem grotesque to some foreigners, ikameshi is very popular among the Japanese*

of local delicacies, I stepped over to the liquor counter located nearby to buy some *sake* made in Nada, an area near Osaka which is famous for producing very rich sake. Having a boxed lunch with sake is absolutely top notch. With delicious food and drink, one can forget all about time on the way to Tokyo.

Most fortunately, it is now possible to enjoy the taste of such travel and food without even getting on a train. The department stores hold special events introducing the ekiben from stations all over the country, from Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south. The most popular item at these "ekiben festivals" recently has been the *ikameshi* bento (a boxed lunch consisting of squid and rice) from Mori Station on the Sapporo Main Line in Hokkaido. The internal organs of the squid are removed, and the squid is then stuffed with glutinous rice and boiled. They are a reasonable ¥470 each. During a 12-day "ekiben market" in a certain department store in Tokyo, 59,557 of these *ikameshi* bento were sold, making it the number-one seller.

Why is it that the Japanese, including myself, enjoy ekiben so much? While searching for the origin of these packaged meals, I came across a piece of travel writing by Jippensha Ikku (1765-1831). This book describes the walking tour between Edo (now Tokyo) and Kyoto during the Edo period (1603-1867). According to this book, the pleasure of this long journey was the food in the various towns and villages. Odawara became known for *uuro*, a gelatinous confection; Kurasawa became known for abalone and a shellfish called *sazae* (or turban shell); and each local area developed its own boxed lunch. During the Meiji period (beginning from 1868), as railroads

were extended, each station came to have its own boxed lunch, which was sold on the platforms. For the Japanese, "travel" and "local food" are an inseparable combination.

When I was an overseas correspondent, I traveled by train many times in both the United States and Europe, and had many opportunities to take meals on the train. Sometimes I ate full-course dinners and other times had sandwiches from the vendor's cart on the train. But I never encountered an ekiben. When traveling by rail in the West, even when meals were served in the dining car, they seemed to have little interest in selling local products at the stations.

By contrast, the Japanese-style boxed lunch might be described as a unique element of Japanese culture. The fried prawn, boiled vegetables and Japanese-style omelette carefully arranged in a small box seem to transmit to us the enjoyment our ancestors shared during their journeys on foot long ago.

My next scheduled business trip was to Hokuriku in northern Japan. The crabbing season in Hokuriku began on Nov. 6, and delicious crabs filled the city markets. When one mentions crabs, I immediately think of the *kani-sushi* bento, a meal of crabmeat and rice, which is sold at Kaga Onsen Station on the Hokuriku Main Line. Freshly caught snow crab is boiled and flavored with cider vinegar, then placed on Kaga's own Koshihikari rice – one glance will tell you how delicious it is. Slightly expensive at ¥1,000, it is nevertheless absolutely superb. My trip will be a busy one, but by making skillful use of plane and train, I should be able to enjoy seasonal food along the way. It will be even better if I can relax in the waters of the Kaga hot spring before heading to the station. **NTI**

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