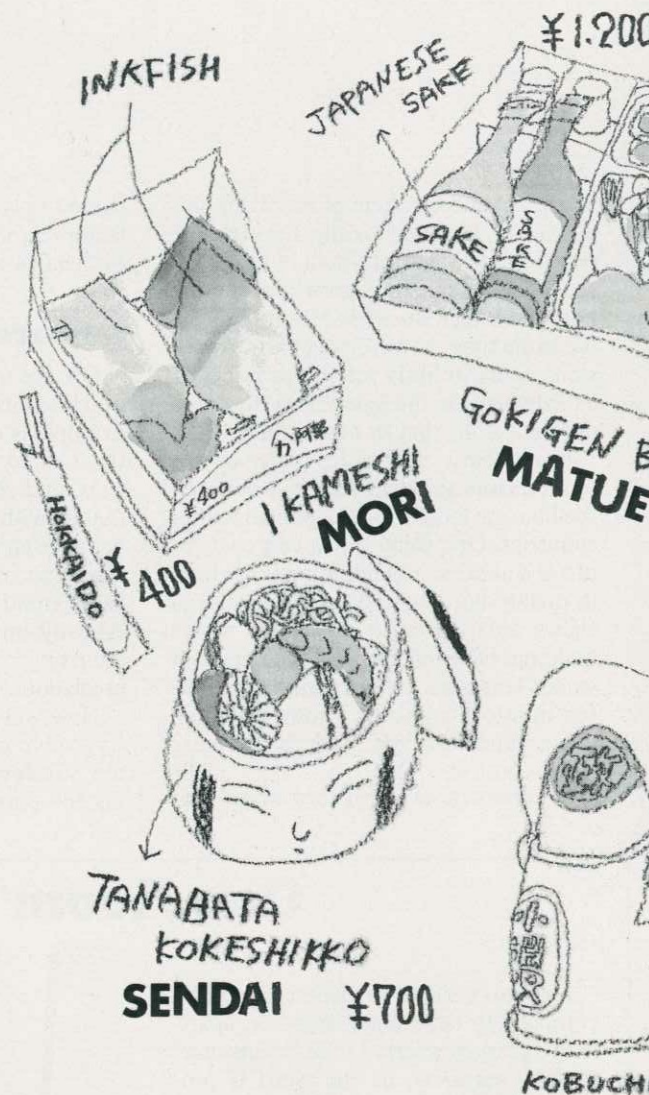
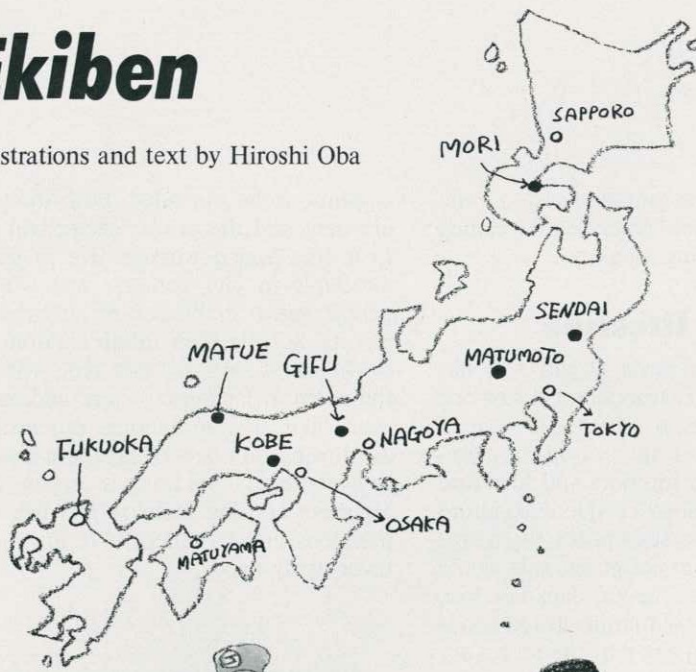


Ekiben

Illustrations and text by Hiroshi Oba



The first public railroad in the modern sense of using locomotive traction is said to have been one built between Stockton and Darlington in England in 1825. Five years later, trains had come to France on the Continent, and by 1831 there were trains in the United States.

The first Japanese train ran on a 32km stretch of track between Shimbashi (in Tokyo) and Yokohama, and its planning was started in 1869. When the first train went into operation in the fall of 1872, the local papers were unable to hide their astonishment at its speed and convenience, and they raved about how it traveled this distance of 32km in only 54 minutes. "Racing like the wind, floating like the clouds, it accomplishes a feat of high-speed travel that would formerly have

been impossible even at great cost," was how one newspaper described it.

If the mass media were this way, one can imagine how the ordinary people felt at seeing this monster, racing down the track spewing black smoke in its wake. Some of them even assumed that since it was working so hard, it must be hot, and they sympathetically splashed water on the locomotive as it went by.

With the trains linking population centers, people soon decided that they wanted to enjoy their train trips. They wanted amenities, and one of these was the *ekiben*—a box lunch bought fresh at the station. The first *ekiben* was sold in Kobe in 1877. This was probably a little bit of rice with some pickled vegetables wrapped in a bamboo sheath.

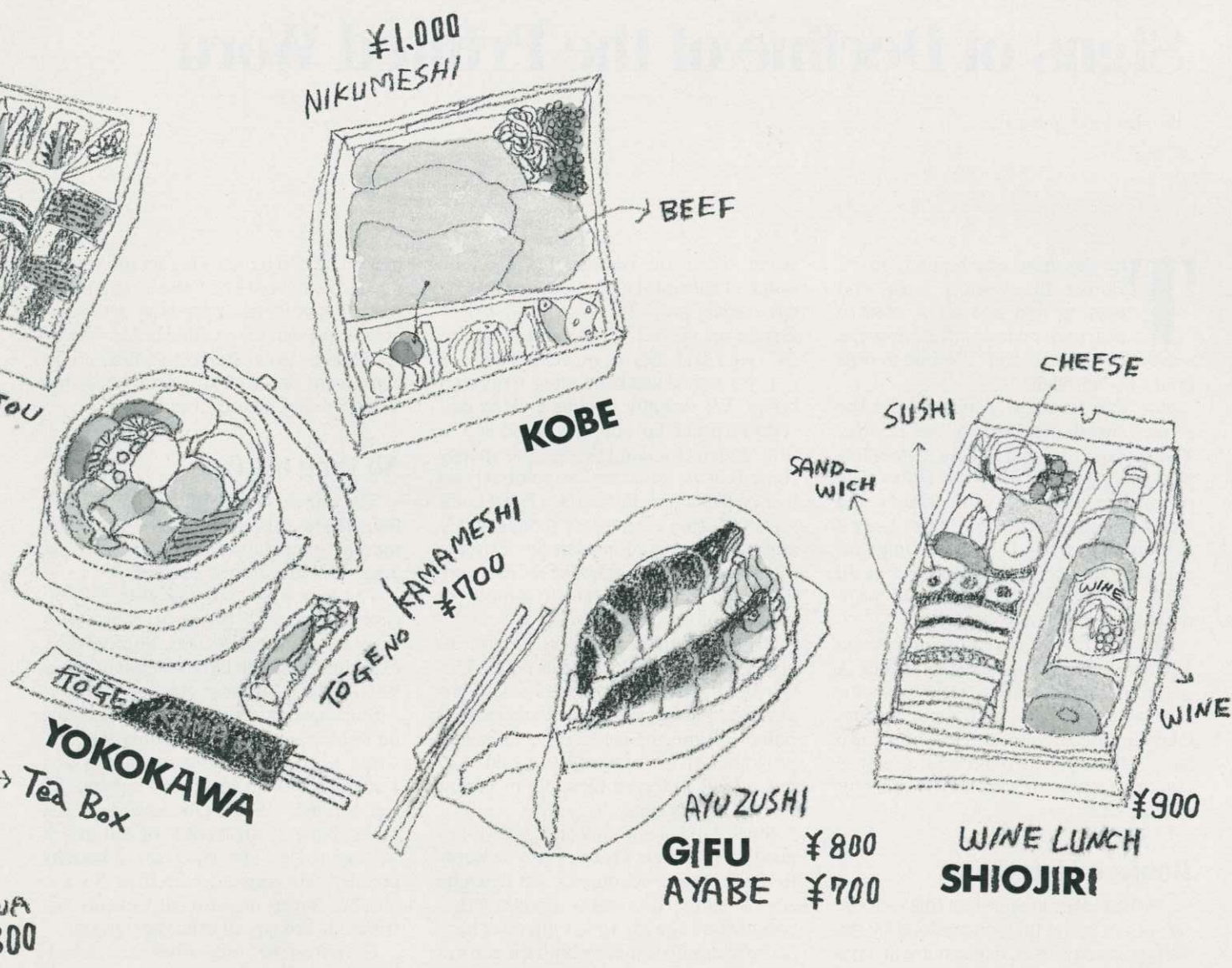
Soon the railways had put on dining

cars to make travel even more enjoyable, but many passengers still preferred the local products that were available at every station. The *ekiben* became an indispensable part of travel.

Each station has its own *ekiben* menu designed to highlight the local products, and each has its distinctive charm. In many ways, the variety of *ekiben* available adds much to the enjoyment of long-distance train travel.

As its name says, the *ika-meshi* sold at Mori (Hokkaido) is heavy on *ika* (squid) and *meshi* (rice). Boiled rice has been stuffed into the squid and the entire dish stewed in a sauce. It is a somewhat rustic food, but conveys some of the sea breezes of northernmost Hokkaido.

In Sendai, there are *ekiben* that have been designed so that the containers are



reusable—a very Japanese idea. The *tanabata kokeshikko* builds upon the *kokeshi* motif—the wooden *kokeshi* dolls that have been made in the Tohoku region since ancient times—and the ceramic box is in the shape of the *kokeshi* doll's head.

This *ekiben*—also named after the very popular *tanabata* festival of mid-summer—is a delicious combination of chicken, *kamaboko*, sweet chestnuts, *shiitake*, and other foods along with a generous portion of rice.

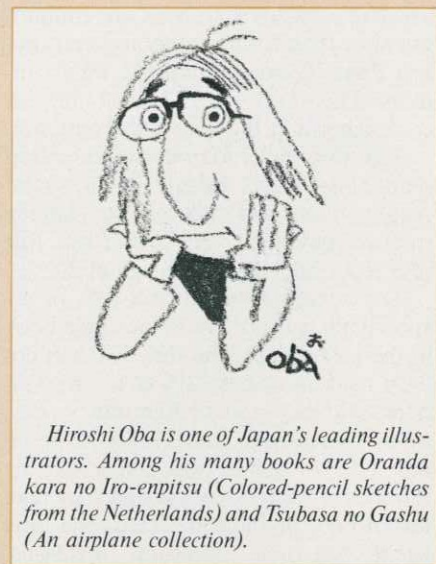
The *ayu* is a small fish favored for *kaiseki* cuisine, and its elegant form and fresh image combine with vinegared rice to make *ayu-zushi*. Sold in the Gifu and San'in areas, this preserves the *ayu* in its pristine shape to present a pleasing sight as well as a delectable taste.

Box lunches bought in Italy often in-

clude wine, and there are similar Japanese *ekiben* in Kofu, Shiojiri and other grape-growing areas. In Kofu, for example, there is one *ekiben*—deep-fried shrimp, smoked guinea fowl and more—with 100cc of Koshu wine. In Shiojiri, there is more wine (180cc) and a similar variety of good food—deep-fried chicken, cheese, *maki-zushi* and even sandwiches.

In Matsue, *sake* takes center-stage, along with pond smelt from Lake Shinji, pickled *wasabi* leaves, *kamaboko* made from flying fish from the Sea of Japan, and many other local specialties.

Indeed, traveling around Japan and sampling the various *ekiben* would be an excellent way to get acquainted with local products, local industry and local traditions. So next time you go on a vacation by train, why not sample the local *ekiben*.



Hiroshi Oba is one of Japan's leading illustrators. Among his many books are *Oranda kara no Iro-enpitsu* (Colored-pencil sketches from the Netherlands) and *Tsubasa no Gashu* (An airplane collection).