

Japanese Culture Now

# 日本のファーストフード その1:ご飯編 Japanese Fast Food Part 1—Rice Dishes

Fast food in Japan is not limited to McDonald's hamburgers. A variety of Japanese fast foods fulfill the demand to be "fast, cheap, and good tasting." In this issue we introduce those centering around rice.

Among the leading Japanese fast foods are dishes with names including the character *don* (丼). They are made in a large bowl, called a *donburi* (丼). A helping of rice is placed in the bowl and topped with a flavored mixture of ingredients that complement the rice. *Donburi* bowl dishes are easy to make and simple to eat. Serving in a *donburi* presents a meal in an informal, popular style.

A *gyudon*, or beef bowl, consists of rice topped with sautéed sliced beef and onions boiled in a sweet and tangy mixture of soy sauce and sugar. Originating, it seems, from the practice of eating beef stewed with other ingredients,



which became popular in the early part of the Meiji era (1868-1912), the beef bowl today is a familiar dish served at *gyudon* shops, which can now be found in almost every town.

The *gyudon* chain Yoshinoya currently operates 884 stores throughout Japan. In addition to 82 shops in the U.S., it has also opened outlets in such overseas locations as Taiwan, China, Singapore, and the Philippines. A medium-size beef bowl at Yoshinoya costs 280 yen. Many people eat it with miso soup (50 yen) and/or salad (90 yen/120 yen), and may order a raw egg (50 yen) to beat and pour over their *gyudon*, or pickled vegetables (90 yen) as condiments.

Yoshinoya website (English): [http://www.yoshinoya-dc.com/eng/n\\_top.html](http://www.yoshinoya-dc.com/eng/n_top.html)

Photo: Yoshinoya D&C



ぎゅうどん 牛丼 *gyudon* (beef bowl)

Today's *onigiri* (also called *omusubi*)—a ball of packed white rice either mixed with or stuffed with savory condiments and wrapped in a sheet of *nori* (laver seaweed)—did not become common until after World War II. The name *onigiri* (おにぎり) comes from the Japanese verb *nigiru* (握る), which means "to pack something together with the hands," in this case, white rice.

*Onigiri* can be made quickly and easily at home to take on outings, picnics, or in a daily lunch box, or even as emergency rations. These days, however, with the spread of convenience stores, the



おにぎり・おむすび *onigiri* and *omusubi* (rice balls)

image of *onigiri* has begun to change from a food prepared by hand at home to a type of fast food purchased in a store. One *onigiri*, featuring a variety of ingredients, such as *umeboshi* (pickled plum), salmon

flakes, dried bonito flakes, sweet-sour boiled *kombu* (kelp), and salted cod roe, among others, sells for 100 to 130 yen at a convenience store. Many ingredients, like tuna with mayonnaise or barbecued meat, only became common as *onigiri* stuffings after being offered at convenience stores.



With foods becoming more health-oriented and *onigiri* shops opening in train stations and on street corners, the value of *onigiri* as a healthy, nutritious food has made them even more popular. Oda Musubi, an *onigiri* shop located at the entrance to Shinjuku station, sells about 4,500 *onigiri* a day at 160 to 180 yen apiece. The price is higher than at a convenience store, but they are very popular for their home-made taste and use of top-quality ingredients with no artificial additives.

Three F's "The Secret to Onigiri" website (Japanese): <http://www.three-f.co.jp/special/onigiri/index.html>

Photo: Hongo Jin

Tempura is seafood or vegetables deep-fried after being coated in a batter of flour, egg, and water. When doused with a sweet and tangy sauce and served in a *donburi* over a helping of rice, tempura is called *tendon*. Although a common meal served at supertime in homes all over Japan, tempura is also a delicacy of specialty restaurants, at 5,000 to 10,000 yen per serving. Recently, however, shops offering



inexpensive and high-quality *tendon* and tempura have been doing well; it seems even tempura is joining the ranks of fast food.



## てんぷら・天丼 *tempura* and *tendon*

At Tenya, a *tendon* chain with about 110 shops in the Kanto region centering on Tokyo, a bowl of *tendon* with a side serving of miso soup costs 490 yen. Freshly deep-fried shrimp, squid, *kisu* fish, pumpkin, and green chili peppers are deliciously succulent. From September through November, Tenya's



autumn *tendon*, one of the limited-time specials on the menu throughout the year, made with seasonal ingredients like salmon and scallops, is available for 690 yen.

Tenya's website (Japanese): <http://www.tenya.co.jp/>

Photo: Ten Corporation

## カレーライス *kare raisu* (curry and rice)



Children and adults alike in Japan love *kare raisu*. Introduced to Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912) after passing through Great Britain from India, today's *kare raisu* has since undergone a variety of innovations. The curry, made by sautéing vegetables and meat, boiling them until soft, and adding a curry roux (a paste made of curry powder and flour, used to thicken the soup), is poured over a plate of white rice. Easy to prepare, it is a frequent item on the household dinner table.

According to a survey conducted by House Foods Corp. in 2000, Japanese eat an average of four servings of curry per month. The usual ingredients of curry and rice are meat, onions, potatoes, and carrots. Each region of Japan, however, has its own idiosyncratic flavors. Osaka curry, for ex-

ample, tends to use beef rather than pork. Recipes for curry are many and diverse, with each family and individual having their own favorite ingredients.

The curry house chain CoCo Ichibanya, which operates about 800 stores throughout Japan, sells 170,000 servings of curry and rice daily. A plate of pork curry costs 400 yen and beef curry 580 yen. Over thirty ingredients can be added for an additional charge, including croquettes, hamburger patties, breaded pork cutlet, cheese, and raw egg.

CoCo Ichibanya website (Japanese): <http://www.ichibanya.co.jp/>

Photo: Ichibanya Hongo Jin

