

# A Day in the Life

## Kome Rice

People in every part of the world eat rice in different ways: the Chinese *chaofan*, the Indonesian *nasi-goreng*, the Korean *kukpap*, the Mexican chili con carne, the Spanish paella, and Japanese *onigiri*. In Japan rice is not only one of many foods, but the most important staple of the diet and the centerpiece of almost every meal.

### Where did rice come from?

Rice is eaten not only in Japan but is the staple of people's diets throughout Asia. Nine thousand years ago it was already being cultivated from India to the region of present-day Yunnan Province in China. Rice agriculture subsequently spread in all directions, and was introduced to Japan about 4,000 years ago.

### What kind of rice is eaten where you live?

Rice can be broadly divided into two varieties; *japonica* and *indica*. The rice consumed in Japan is almost always of the short-grained *japonica* variety, which is more glutinous and sticky when cooked. *Indica* strains of rice are generally long-grained and drier and lighter when cooked. There is also a category of rice native to Africa. One popular way of eating rice in Japan is as *onigiri*, balls or triangles of rice packed firmly by hand or in a mold, and this is possible because of the sticky quality of the *japonica* variety. Ways of cooking and serving rice clearly vary for each variety of rice.

### What types of grain are eaten where you live?

#### How are they related to the climate in your area?

Japan's climate is characterized by hot summers and abundant rainfall. This provides an ideal environment for cultivating rice or, as the Japanese call it *kome*. *Kome* is grown in paddies in Japan and some parts of East Asia, and archaeological evidence indicates that the Japanese first began to live in fixed settlements after they acquired the techniques of wet-rice cultivation.

Population naturally concentrated in areas suited to this type of farming, villages were created, and a society gradually developed that centered on the cycle of rice cultivation. Until the mid-nineteenth century the size of a local lord's estate was measured by the amount of rice it yielded, and the stipends of government officials and samurai as well as the taxes levied on farmers were paid in rice. In that sense, *kome* was as precious as money.



Izuka Yoshiteru

The family is gathered for the Saturday evening meal, even Father, who usually has to work overtime and rarely gets home in time for dinner with the family on weekdays. Tonight's menu consists of rice, miso soup, grilled fish, deep-fried chicken, and salad. The container marked "*furikake*" contains a bonito-flake-flavored seasoning for sprinkling on rice. There are several varieties of *furikake*, made with *nori* (seaweed), salmon flakes, and other ingredients. Shoyu, another important seasoning, is on the table to be added before eating. Each place is set with individual servings in separate bowls and plates. Each member of the family has his or her own chopsticks and rice bowl. The eldest child has just come home late from *juku* (cram school). In a hurry to sit down and eat, he doesn't forget his "*itadakimasu!*" The customary words spoken before starting to eat, it expresses gratitude for the meal one is about to partake. Usually, everyone says "*itadakimasu!*" together after sitting down to eat. His sister, a few years younger, loves the deep-fried chicken on the menu tonight. In accordance with good Japanese manners, she holds her bowl in her left hand as she eats her rice. Mother serves up a bowlful of rice for her late-arriving son. Serving rice at the table is usually the mother's job. Father is in a good mood, enjoying sake, rice wine, with his dinner. As each person finishes, they say "*gochisōsama,*" expressing appreciation and gratitude for the meal.



*Raisu bāgā*, rice burger. Fast foods made with rice are starting to come on the market to



Most of the festivals that Japanese celebrate today began long ago when people gathered in the fields to pray for a bountiful harvest. *Shōgatsu*, or New Year's, was actually a ritual to honor the rice god. Even today, all forty-seven prefectures in Japan grow rice. The country's total annual rice production for 1995 was approximately 11 million tons, which represents 30 percent of total agricultural production. Rice-growing is a key Japanese industry, and until recently a government license was required to sell rice.

**What food is important to you?**

If you take a close look at daily life in Japan, you will find that a great many commodities are made from *kome*, ranging from breakfast foods, ready-to-eat *bentō* (box lunches), and *onigiri* to frozen prepared fried rice, pilaff and casseroles, snacks like rice crackers (*senbei*) and rice cakes (*mochi*), sake (rice wine), seasonings, and even soap. Institutionally served school lunches are sometimes rice-based. Gift coupons for rice are one way of expressing gratitude for favors done. An electric rice cooker is an essential appliance of the Japanese home.

The average Japanese adult consumes mostly at least one bowl of *gohan*, or cooked rice, a day. Japanese rice-based provisions went to outer space with the first Japanese female astronaut, Mukai Chiaki, when she joined the crew of the Space Shuttle in 1994. When the Great Hanshin Earthquake caused Japan's greatest postwar domestic crisis in 1995, volunteers distributed *onigiri* as emergency rations for the victims. And almost every Japanese has memories of being nursed by their mothers

while suffering one illness or another with nutritious, easily digestible *okayu* or rice porridge. *Okayu* is also the first solid food fed to babies. Since the end of World War II, consumption of bread and other starches in Japan has increased while that of *kome* has decreased, but recently young people have begun to recognize that rice is a nutritionally well-balanced food that can be included as part of a healthy diet.

For Japanese, moreover, *kome* is not merely a food; it affects their daily lives in various ways. The word *furusato* or "home" conjures up images of a rice-paddy dotted rural landscape even for people who were raised in the city. Its culture and traditions deeply embedded in four millennia of life on the Japanese archipelago, *kome* in many ways represents the heartland of the Japanese spirit. ♪



Tanbo, a paddy field where rice is grown by the wet-rice cultivation method.



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Mochi, rice cake. Made of pounded glutinous rice (*mochigome*), *mochi* are customarily eaten at *Shōgatsu* or New Year's. This is a special New Year's decoration made with *mochi* as the centerpiece.



Typical breakfast fare. (This is a traditional Japanese breakfast, although many people eat bread or cereal, too.)



Onigiri, rice ball.



Sake, wine made from rice.

## Vocabulary

Match the rice-related words listed below with the explanations in A to E. (Answers are under box)

1. *raisu* ライス
2. *kome* 米(こめ)
3. *gohan* ご飯(ごはん)
4. *shinmai* 新米(しんまい)
5. *Beikoku* 米国(べいこく)

### A.

Rice in general, and particularly uncooked rice.



### B.

Literally means "rice country," an abbreviation of the original Japanese characters used to approximate the English pronunciation of the word for America (United States) 亜米利加 (*a-me-ri-ka*).

### C.

Rice which has been cooked. One serving in a typical Japanese rice bowl is about 150 grams. The word is also used to mean "meal."



### D.

Rice that has been harvested in the same year. It is also used to mean "a newcomer," such as someone new to the job, a "greenhorn."

### E.

A plate of rice accompanying a Western-style meal.



Answer: 1.E, 2.A, 3.C, 4.D, 5.B

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In commemoration of TJF's tenth anniversary, we offer 50 lesson-plan package sets for this issue's topic "Kome." The package includes the essay published here in the Japanese original along with a Japanese-language lesson plan, a set of color-copy photographs related to rice, the character for *kome* written on *hanshi* (paper for writing with a brush), a list of homepage addresses relating to the culture of rice, books, and reference materials concerning rice. Included is a copy of

the "Itadakimasu: The History of Japanese Rice," the lesson plan created by Ms. Sandra Lopez-Richter (Florida, U.S.A.) which won the grand prize in the secondary school division in TJF's "First Contest on Ideas and Examples of How to Teach Culture in Japanese-language Class" in 1995.

Applicants wishing to receive the Tenth Anniversary Lesson Plan Package should send a letter (1) telling how the topics on Japanese culture taken up in this series (*obentō, ofuro, ocha, kutsu nugi*) have been useful in your classroom and (2) suggesting other topics they would like to see introduced in the series. Please also give your name, address, school name, and telephone, fax, and e-mail numbers. Send applications by post, fax or e-mail by September 30. If there are more than 50 applications, recipients will be decided by drawing lots. The packages will be sent out in October.