

People in Station Lunchbox Business

The allure of train travel is different for every person. You can spend the time reaching your destination as you prefer—gazing absent-mindedly at the ever-changing scenery, sleeping while rocked by the train, or leafing through a half-read book in your study on wheels. Of all the choices, most Japanese mention the lunchboxes as one of the pleasures of train travel. In Japan, these lunchboxes bought at stations or on the train itself, are called *ekibento* (station lunchboxes).

A nearly infinite range of station lunchboxes is sold at stations serving shinkansen and express trains, giving travellers a chance to experience local flavours. Station lunchboxes available at each station on the Tohoku Shinkansen from Tokyo to Sendai add colour to the journey; the 'Masamune Lunchbox' featuring the name of Masamune Date, a feudal lord from north-eastern Japan; the 'Fish 'n' Roe Lunchbox', rice topped with salmon and salmon roe, at Morioka; and the 'Beef Lunchbox' from Yamagata, renowned for its beef.

Railways in Japan spread at an astounding rate since the first line between Tokyo's Shimbashi and Yokohama in 1872. Dining cars were part of every train from 1897 in an effort to make travel more convenient. It was against this backdrop that NIPPON SHOKUDO CO., LTD. (Japan Diner KK) was incorporated in 1938 solely to operate dining cars. Nowadays, the company is re-

sponsible for managing dining cars, buffets and on-board sales for shinkansen and other lines managed by JR East. It also produces and sells lunchboxes and popular dishes on a take-out basis, and has now undertaken management of top-class Western and Japanese specialty restaurants, chain restaurants, and fast food outlets. In fact, Nippon Shokudo sells as many as 20,000 station lunchboxes each day.

Nippon Shokudo's best-selling lunchboxes are the 'Theater Lunchbox', for its wide selection of items, the one-dish 'Rice-pot Dinner Lunchbox', and the 'Chicken-n-Rice Lunchbox', but the company is endlessly developing new lunchboxes to appeal to the broad spectrum of tastes.

The 500-pack per day 'Limited-edition Paella Lunchbox' is especially popular with young people in Tokyo and Ueno Stations, or on the Tohoku and Joetsu Shinkansen where it is sold. Paella is Spain's equivalent of the 'Rice-pot Dinner' in which rice and other ingredients are cooked together. 'Limited-edition Paella Lunchbox' appeared in 1994 in a truly Western-style lunchbox. The idea started with an employee's study trip to Europe. Shozo Kato, Product Development Manager for the Nippon Shokudo Food Preparation Centre, wondered if he could use paella in a station lunchbox, because the rice-based dish suits Japanese taste. 'The most important point in creating the product was the

rice we used', comments Kato. We use Japanese rice, with its high moisture content, so it would be palatable when cold, and spent 3 months studying cooking methods such as reducing the amount of water. For the flavour, Kato called in Chef Norio Sato from Restaurant Pastel, Nippon Shokudo's top-class Western restaurant. Sato is the genuine article having trained at three-star French restaurants such as *La Serre* and *Auberge Deauville* before joining the luxury delicatessen firm Fauchon to study take-out techniques. For a more genuine flavour, he requested a foundation known as the Spanish Association to advise and supervise the project. The paella lunchbox was completed after 8 months work, two or three times the usual development period for a station lunchbox. Kato says eating is his hobby, and his passion for research leads him to lunchbox corners across Japan, or to sample new lunchbox products at corner-store franchise outlets on his days off. Kato is already immersed in development of his next product saying, 'Wouldn't it be great to turn flavours from all around the world into lunchboxes, to emphasize Tokyo's international mood'. Apart from new product development, he spends his energy improving current lunchboxes, and in 1994 started the Lunchbox Improvements Committee. He is working on creating lunchboxes that consumers want by collecting consumer



Chef Sato (Nippon Shokudo)



Mr Kato (middle) Supervising Lunchbox Preparation (Nippon Shokudo)

responses from questionnaires included in lunchboxes, and listening to the opinions of outside product monitors. He uses seasonal ingredients and creates a seasonal mood for the popular 'Theater Lunchbox'. Shizuka Yasui, a section chief in Customer PR and a committee member says, 'Customers want us to use healthy ingredients in lunchboxes. Recently, consumers don't like garishly-coloured dishes or very salty food'. Nippon Shokudo listened and started using natural products instead of food dyes. Yasui does the round of lunchbox vendors daily saying, 'It's important to listen to what people selling lunchboxes have to say'.

Passengers for the limited expresses and shinkansen can be seen making hasty purchases of lunchboxes and drinks in the concourses of Tokyo Station. Tomomi Tanaka, who sells lunchboxes in the central concourse, started as a part-timer when she was a student. She was searching for a job she could do before violin classes at the university she was attending, and one that would also allow her to meet lots of people. She has graduated now, but continues selling lunchboxes between recitals. 'I enjoy all the people I meet'. says Tanaka. It's true that many of her customers are in a rush to buy a lunchbox before their train departs, but she also talks with customers who have time to spare. She says she has more foreign customers just recently. 'I



From left, Ms Watabiki, Ms Tanaka and Ms Yasui (EJRCF)



Station Lunchboxes

(Nippon Shokudo)

show them photos of the lunchbox contents and do my best to explain the tastes to people who want a Japanese-type rice lunchbox instead of sandwiches'. Tanaka dreams of the day when she will find more work as a violinist. She looks forward to discovering how the feelings she experiences through her work will affect her violin playing.

Lunchboxes are sold not only in stations, but on the trains as well. Junko Watabiki, who has been selling lunchboxes in trains since she joined Nippon Shokudo in 1991, also discovered the job as a student. She pushes a cart loaded with lunchboxes and drinks through the carriages, but she must also judge how many more lunchboxes to take on board at stations en route, estimating demand from the look of boarding passengers. In her student days she dreamed of becoming an airline cabin attendant, but when she began selling lunchboxes as a student, she discovered the advantages of providing service to shinkansen passengers instead of airline passengers, and decided to continue after graduation. Watabiki, a travel fan, says she will never give up her job, which allows her to travel from place-to-place, using her free time for sightseeing. In fact, almost all her younger colleagues were drawn to the job by their love of trains or travel. Watabiki says that through her job, she has got to know local lunchbox

vendors at other stations, and is sometimes asked to sample new lunchbox products in development. Station lunchboxes create an ever lengthening chain of friends. 'Don't hesitate to try the different lunchboxes in different areas. You'll undoubtedly make your trip more memorable'. says Watabiki. Some shinkansen have lunchbox vending machines, a sign of the times, but meeting sales staff like Watabiki on board, who know what lunchboxes from each area taste like, is another pleasure of train travel.

Nippon Shokudo sponsored a 'Nippon Shokudo Lunchbox Contest' in September 1996. Consumers were asked to submit lunchboxes, and 184 entries were submitted from across Japan. The best were selected and some were developed commercially and sold for a limited period at kiosks. The 'Lady Komachi Lunchbox', developed as a commercial product this year, uses no artificial preservatives, and also uses best-quality ingredients. Kato mentions that by holding this event annually, he hopes to find what customers want in a station lunchbox. It is true that station lunchboxes reflect the current opinion of Japanese about modern food.

Station lunchboxes provide a warm welcome for travellers throughout Japan, reflecting the local history or products, or the feelings of the producers.