

Dining Car and Meal Services on the Train

Toshiki Utsu

Roots of Railways and Services

Japan's railways began in 1872 with the opening of the first line between Shimbashi and Yokohama. Onboard services started 3 years later when cushions were loaned to passengers for sitting on; it was the beginning of an inseparable bond between railways and services.

The origins of meal services for passengers date back to when an inn named Shirokiya started selling two *onigiri* rice balls and *takuan* pickled radish wrapped in bamboo bark at Utsunomiya Station in 1885. Subsequently, boxed meals sold in stations across Japan came to be called *ekiben* from the Japanese words for station (*eki*) and boxed lunch (*bento*). A huge variety of *ekiben* are still sold in stations, even featuring items such as local specialty foods.

Start of Dining Car Services

Onboard meal services started in 1899 with the introduction of dining cars. At the time, dining cars were only for first- and second-class passengers. There was segregation because the poor manners of many third-class passengers would offend first- and second-class passengers and to prevent third-class passengers from staying too long in dining cars, which were much more comfortable than third-class seats! Meals were oriented towards fashionable upper-class tastes, so they were western style and normally not eaten by the general public. It is said that the railways wanted to also provide traditional Japanese cuisine, but the limited space in dining cars prevented it. Third-class passengers were allowed to use dining cars from 1901 when rail travel had come into common public use.

Dining-car operations expanded steadily and the various companies entering the market fared well. Shortages due to rationing during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) eventually became a problem, and discussions between railway officials and dining car operators in 1938 led to a merger of dining car operator management. Nippon Shokudo Co., Ltd. was established and started operations that year, becoming the predecessor of West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company.

Train services were temporarily halted in 1944 due to

the war, but restarted again in 1945 at the war's end. Given the opportunity provided by the resumption of train services, dining cars were coupled to nearly all long-distance trains. The negative effects of a monopoly by one company were soon noted, and companies other than Nippon Shokudo were established in 1953.

Until 1958, meals were only served in the dining car, but buffet cars were introduced starting with the first *Kodama* limit express. *Kodama* was described as a business express, focused on business passengers. As a result, the dining car was converted to a buffet where lower prices were easier to use. Light meals and drinks were the main offerings in buffet cars and their simplified design helped reduce the initial costs. They also required fewer personnel because the meals were relatively simple. The menu choice increased after 1961 as the introduction of microwave ovens allowed quick reheating of frozen and refrigerated foods.

Start of Shinkansen

The world's first high-speed railway started in 1964 in conjunction with the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games. Before then, the trip between Tokyo and Osaka took 6.5 hours but the *Hikari* soon cut the time to just 3 hours and 10 minutes (about 4 hours in the first year). This made it possible to make same-day return business trips between Tokyo and Osaka, contributing to the booming growth of the Japanese economy.

Instead of conventional dining cars, the *Kodama* buffet car was the only onboard meal service and it was possible because of the much shorter travel times on the fast shinkansen trains.

Shinkansen services expanded westward across Japan, reaching Okayama in 1972 to connect with the Shikoku and San'yō regions (Tokyo–Okayama in 4 hours 10 minutes) and then to Hakata on Kyushu in 1975 (Tokyo–Hakata: 6 hours 56 minutes). With the longer travel times, dining cars were deemed necessary and construction of rolling stock for shinkansen dining cars started.

The standard-gauge shinkansen offered an opportunity to improve comfort for dining car passengers; dining cars on narrow-gauge lines had tables on both sides with a median aisle allowing passengers to walk through the dining car

between the tables while others were eating. The wider shinkansen cars enabled design of a wider dining area on the carriage seaward side to give passengers a view while enjoying a meal and the aisle was moved to the landward mountain side, allowing meals to be eaten with less disturbance. However, this layout was not without problems. Putting the aisle on the mountain side and installing walls to prevent people passing through seeing people eating blocked the view of Mt Fuji, a renowned scenic gem and important symbol of Japan. A reporter covering a press conference before the introduction of dining cars is said to have pointed out that Mt Fuji could not be seen, but it was too late to change the layout then, because the rolling stock had been completed. Operations started as they were, but many passengers complained about the lack of a view of Mt Fuji, so windows were added to the partitions 4 years later in 1974.

During this era, Japan started using the 'restaurant industry' index and onboard meal service provider Nippon Shokudo held the top spot from the start of surveys in 1974 until 1978.

Decline of Narrow-Gauge Dining Cars

Unlike the flourishing meal services on shinkansen, meal services on conventional lines started declining gradually in the 1970s. One reason was that operating sections and travel times were shortened on narrow-gauge lines running parallel with shinkansen lines as they expanded westwards. In the end, dining cars disappeared as more new trains were not coupled with dining cars. Another factor behind the decline was that the Hokuriku Tunnel fire in 1972 was thought to have been caused by a coal-fired stove in the dining car (it was later determined to have been caused by an electrical short). As a result, meal preparation using an open flame was prohibited, and older dining cars without electrical cooking equipment could no longer be used. Japanese National Railways (JNR) was facing a financial crisis and could not afford to build replacements for older decommissioned dining cars. Another factor was lack of available personnel. Securing people for poorly paid jobs with tough working conditions was difficult. There was also a shortage of personnel because many had transferred to limited expresses and shinkansen.

Meal Services Environment

While onboard meal services centred on providing meals in dining cars or buffets, sale of *ekiben*, snacks, cigarettes,



Interior of *Twilight Express* sleeper limited express dining car

(JR West)



Twilight Express tableware

(JR West)

etc., in the carriages started using carts. One reason was because of more purchase demand from passengers with long travel times. There was also a need for meal services because sales of goods in and around stations were weak at the time.

Train crews also needed meals, something that is still true today on the long-distance *Twilight Express* sleeper limited express between Osaka and Sapporo.

However, the fast-food boom in the 1980s with McDonalds taking the top spot in 1982 saw more people bringing their own food onto trains. This era also saw the opening of convenience stores like Family Mart and 7-Eleven, and it was only a matter

of time before more people brought their own food onboard, marking a decrease in use of onboard services.

JNR Privatization and Division

Japanese railways reached a major turning point in 1987 with the JNR privatization and division, splitting the national railway operator into separate regional private companies.

Each regional railway company after privatization had to be financially self-supporting, so they naturally had different management policies. As a result, meal services are naturally handled differently by region. The significance of Nippon Shokudo continuing to operate nationwide as a single entity also declined. Consequently, it too was split up according to passenger railway boundaries 1 year after JNR was privatized. West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company initially split from Nippon Shokudo as a company called Nisshoku Nishi Nihon to handle operations in the JR West operations area.

Reborn Meal Services

Around this time, meal services on conventional lines underwent a major review. Dining and buffet cars were eliminated on all trains except long-distance sleeper limited expresses, and only cart sales remained.

On the other hand, the new, faster Series 100 shinkansen introduced in 1985 featured two split-level cars (No. 8 and 9) with a dining car on the top deck of car No. 8. Although the older Series 0 had an aisle in part of the dining car, the Series 100 moved the aisle along with the kitchen to the lower deck, leaving the entire upper deck as a dining car seating 44 people. Two lifts carried meals and dishes

up and down between the two decks. At that time, travel between Tokyo and Hakata on the Series 100 took 5 hours 57 minutes, a drop of 1 hour from the first shinkansen service between the cities.

There were three types of Series 100 shinkansen trains. In addition to the *Grand Hikari* with four split-level cars including the dining car, there were cafeteria cars meeting convenience store and family restaurant needs by providing take-out Japanese, Western, and Chinese meals. They also had conveniently sized items such as white rice, prepared dishes, and desserts; passengers could choose what they wanted and eat at their seats.

In 1988, JR West introduced the *West Hikari* train using modified Series 0 rolling stock for service between Shin-Osaka and Hakata. The idea was to provide a relaxed and comfortable space where passengers could spend a relaxing time, unlike on airlines with whom the company was battling for market share. While the normal shinkansen seat layout had five rows of seats in coach seats and four rows in the Green Car (first class), this train had rows of seats in coach too. Meals were served from a buffet car, because the 2 hours 59 minutes travel time between Shin-Osaka and Hakata was relatively short. Although called a buffet car, seating was in restaurant fashion with tables and chairs on a carpeted floor to give passengers a relaxing space. The menu featured standard dinner trays and curry with rice as well as snacks and other foods that had a local flair. It was well received by passengers and the buffet would often fill up as soon as the doors opened at the first stop on the line. Some *West Hikari* trains had a cinema car where the entire car became a film theatre. Films that could usually only be seen in a theatre were enjoyed at a low price and this service was much liked by passengers.

To compete with such services, airlines cut their prices further, and the fight for market share heated up.

Declining Dining Car Business and New Meal Services

Airlines are the main competitor for shinkansen in long-distance transport. Many of Japan's airports are located well away from the city centre, so the competitive edge of railways is in reducing total travel time in comparison to air travel that includes the extra time to get to and from the airport.

To meet this competitive need, the new Series 300 shinkansen rolling stock was introduced in 1992, with through service to the JR West area starting in 1993. In the 30 years after the start of the shinkansen, the main trains



West Hikari shinkansen buffet

(JR West)

have been the *Hikari* stopping only at major cities and the *Kodama* stopping at every station. The new Series 300 was dubbed *Nozomi*, and it increased speeds from 220 km/h (230 km/h for the *Grand Hikari*) to 270 km/h. It inaugurated a new 'super high-speed age' with travel times between Tokyo and Hakata at 5 hours 3 minutes and between Shin-Osaka and Hakata at 2 hours 32 minutes.

The large speed increase led to a major review of shinkansen meal services, and the dining car soon disappeared from Series 300 and later shinkansen as result of the much reduced travel times. New meal facilities dubbed 'service corners' were set up to replace the dining cars. They were shop spaces adjacent to Green Cars (No. 8, 9, and 10) and in car No. 7 and 11 selling boxed meals, drinks, snacks, and the like. A major advantage was that passengers no longer needed to pass through Green Cars, which normally require an additional fee to access, and proved annoying to Green Car passengers. Similar situations do not occur in the first and business classes of airplanes. Sold items were modelled after airline cabin service, with special products available only to Green Car passengers. Dedicated carts just for Green Cars were used to sell items such as *bento* and *miso soup* only to Green Car passengers.

Japan was in the middle of a 'bubble' economy when meal services on the Series 300 were being considered and the restaurant business was enjoying rapid expansion. There was large passenger demand for meal services when the series was first introduced, but growth in sales of major companies was less than 1% after the collapse of the bubble—Japan had entered the era of zero growth. Use of meal services declined and the restaurant business was at a turning point. Conversely, lower-price replacements such as boxed meals from convenience stores and pizza delivery saw major growth at that time.

Japan's *Bento* Box Meal Culture

Ekiben box meals are more than just meals in Japan—they are almost a form of culture. At major stations, multiple local *ekiben* sellers are often in friendly competition to provide colourful and gorgeous boxed meals.

Methods for selling *ekiben* include the usual methods of shops and onboard carts. Another form that is for the most part now just a nostalgic memory is hawkers carrying rectangular trays piled with *bento*, tea, and other items to sell as trains arrive at a station. A feature is that passengers stay on the train and open the window to call over a hawker, and the sale is concluded through the window. It had its heyday in the age when many lines were single track and a train would often stand at the station for a long time waiting for another train to pass. Today, it is for the most part a bygone tale.

Another example of *ekiben* being a form of culture in

Japan is the department-store '*ekiben* fair' where *ekiben* from across Japan are sold. A major feature of *ekiben* fairs is demonstration sales. *Ekiben* that are normally made in food plants are purposefully created in front of customers. As a result of such events, what were simply boxed meals purchased when travelling have become famous items known nationwide.

Ekiben have many fans. Some people travel for the specific purpose of eating a certain *ekiben*, and others collect the wrapping paper of *ekiben* from various locations. This wrapping paper is called '*kake-gami*' and is decorated with various pictures and illustrations for individual *ekiben*. It is even sold over the Internet as collectors' items.

End of Dining Car Business and More Speed Increases

Japan suffered major damage from the Great Hanshin Earthquake on 17 January 1995. It was an inland shallow earthquake centred on Hyogo Prefecture in what is called the navel of Japan, but the shaking was felt as far east as Fukushima and as far south as Kagoshima. The earthquake cut railways between east and west. Shinkansen viaducts collapsed, some conventional line stations were completely destroyed, and reconstruction was expected to take quite a long time. However, rapid recovery efforts resulted in the reopening of conventional lines after 74 days on 1 April and of shinkansen lines after 81 days on 8 April.

The operation of dining cars that had served since the start of the Series 0 shinkansen was to have been eliminated at the March 1995 timetable revision, but the earthquake resulted in the retirement of dining cars without fanfare, a stark contrast to their glorious beginnings.

The *Nozomi* shinkansen made its debut 2 years later in 1997. It was an epoch-making departure from shinkansen trains until then. To achieve high-speed operations at 300 km/h, the first 15 m of the 27-m long lead car—more than half the length—was sharply pointed. With an exterior reminiscent of a jet fighter, these lead cars are still popular today. The top speed on the San'yo section was raised from 270 km/h to what was then the world's fastest at 300 km/h, cutting travel times between Tokyo and Hakata to 4 hours 49 minutes and between Shin-Osaka and Hakata to 2 hours 17 minutes. Service corners were set up for meal services, but sales by special carts were not introduced.

The Series 700 debuted 2 years later in 1999 with a top speed of 285 km/h. While not reaching the 300 km/h of the Series 500, it became the dominant train due to improved comfort. Onboard meal services declined further with the introduction of these high-speed trains. Other than cart sales, dining cars, buffets, and service corners all involved direct over-the-counter contact by the passenger

with a purser but with the decline in users, drinks vending machines were set up instead of service corners.

Dining cars were finally overcome by the increase in train speeds, and the last shinkansen dining car was discontinued in 2000 after 25 years of dining-car services.

JR West Strategy to Compete with Airlines

The most profitable section for JR West is Kyoto–Osaka–Kobe and Kitakyushu–Fukuoka. Consequently, a new train was brought into service in 2000 to replace the *West Hikari*. It was based on the Series 700 that had debuted the previous year, but it was built to specialize in operations between Shin-Osaka and Hakata. Like the *West Hikari*, the strategy was to gain an advantage over airlines in the competition for market share. Normal shinkansen have 16 cars to carry a larger number of passengers. However, because the new train travelled only between Shin-Osaka and Hakata, it only needed 8 cars to meet passenger demand. Market research on who would use the train was reflected in the design. First, like the *West Hikari*, four-seat rows were introduced in the reserved cars to allow passengers to spend their time in comfort—they were dubbed ‘saloon seats’. ‘Office seats’ were also set up with large tables and power sockets, targeting business passengers who would make up the bulk of passengers, and a service that allowed personal computers to be used was introduced. This service could not be copied by airlines, which at that time were restricting use of electronic devices onboard. The train was dubbed *Rail Star* and was packed with popular services provided at no extra cost, such as ‘silent cars’ without in-car announcements, and four-person ‘compartments’ that could be used by groups.

Meal services on *Rail Star* used cart sales and vending machines as with the Series 700. However, the pursers conducting cart sales were called ‘*star crew*’; their uniform design matched the new train and they sold specialties from across the San’yō region from new carts.

Strategy Changes from Increasing Speed to Providing Service

By earning the solid support of passengers after the introduction of *Rail Star*, the shinkansen recaptured share from airlines between Kyoto/Osaka/Kobe and Fukuoka. This was achieved by discovering what passengers wanted in the train rather through the conventional model of development based on railway circumstances.

In 2000, JR West restructured its subsidiaries for providing in-station sales and food services. By merging companies in the same industry, measures that made no progress with multiple companies could be applied quickly

to produce the greatest effects. West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company gained its current business form as a result of that restructuring. The company runs meal and hospitality services in the JR West area on both conventional and shinkansen lines. It also manages food and drink shops and kiosks in stations. With the opportunity provided by restructuring, JR West could bring new services, including meal services, to customers. Details of services for passengers on shinkansen were reviewed in 2003. Until then, these had been mainly meal services, with comfort services only being provision of wet hand towels to Green Car passengers. Overall demand was determined and underused service corners were eliminated with meal services refocused on cart sales and vending machines to provide appropriate and necessary services.

As a result, pursers who had previously handled customers at service corners were free to actively walk through the carriages, provide guidance to customers, collect trash, etc., to create an even more comfortable onboard space for passengers. By taking on tasks other than sales, West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company provided an opportunity to reaffirm the significance of purser training in customer service, and the foundations were formed for a variety of education programmes that are still being carried out today.

Kyushu Shinkansen Starts Operation

The Series N700 combining the speed of the Series 500 with the comfort of the Series 700 debuted in 2007. A key feature of this train is power outlets on aisle seats in Coach class and all seats in Green Cars. Outlets were installed to meet the needs of passengers using laptops while travelling. Another feature is that this train is entirely non-smoking throughout. While this was not considered in the early design phase, Japanese law requires that exposure to second-hand smoke be prevented. In response, railways had separate smoking and non-smoking areas in stations and had banned smoking on short-distance trains. However, shinkansen and other long-distance trains had only partially separated smoking and non-smoking; passengers passing along aisles and vestibule sections were still exposed to second-hand smoke. With a WHO policy recommendation reflecting changing attitudes to smoking, complete separation was determined as necessary so all cars were changed to completely non-smoking, and fully isolated smoking spaces were set up in vestibules.

Sakura Project

The Sakura Project was started by West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company when the Series N700 debuted in anticipation of through services between the San’yō and

Kyushu shinkansen from March 2011. The objective was to convince passengers of the need for in-carriage services even more than ever.

The San'yō Shinkansen connects to the Tokaido Shinkansen and the Kyushu Shinkansen and both operators have onboard customer services including meal services; JR-Central Passengers Co., Ltd. manages the Tokaido Shinkansen while JR Kyushu Services Section manages the Kyushu Shinkansen. At the time, West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company had just started working on customer services other than meal services, and it was judged to be behind the other companies in terms of service level, so the Sakura Project was started to bring the level up to that of the other companies.

Specific efforts consisted of breaking management policy into three parts. Safety efforts were first. The idea was to analyze accidents from various angles and prevent similar accidents based on the concept that there is no peace of mind without safety. Efforts in service were second. We looked at what we should do to allow passengers to spend their time in comfort. Of course, we studied general hospitality, but we also looked into predicting future customer needs and having pursers propose actions. Improving product appeal and selling capability came third. Customer needs and tastes are fast changing, and customers lose interest when the product line-up does not change too. Consequently, we decided to actively introduce new products and advertise products using in-cabin announcements and POP to allow proposal of products from various approaches.

We saw working on those policies one-by-one with an in-depth training system and making steady efforts as the only way to achieve our objective of reaching the level of the other two companies.

During these preparations the 8-car Series N700 rolling stock for through services onto the Kyushu Shinkansen was at last completed and reflected passenger needs like *Rail Star* had done. It was 8 cars to reflect passenger demand but unlike the *Rail Star* it was coupled with Green Cars. The designers were very passenger-conscious in offering a variety of services such as powder rooms to meet the expectations of new target women passengers.

West Japan Railway Food Service Net Company was in charge of meal services and worked to develop a new sales tool as a highlight for the new train, based on sales of draft beer from an aisle cart. Draft beer had been sold way back when dining cars were running, but had disappeared along with dining cars because a restaurant licence assuring provision of hot water to wash dishes and glasses was required by Japanese law to sell draft beer. Simple installation of hot water equipment on the train was all that was needed for renewed sales of draft beer.

Purser motivation grew rapidly with the completion of the train and the decision was made to start service on 12 March 2011. The new Tohoku Shinkansen section to Shin-Aomori would open 1 week before on 5 March, finally connecting the northern extremity of Honshu at Aomori with the southern extremity of Kyushu at Kagoshima by shinkansen.

Unfortunately, what was supposed to be a spectacular celebration ended up with cancellation of all ceremonies because the Great East Japan Earthquake struck the previous day.

All we could do was provide the best service to the many passengers looking forward to riding the new line that day. Many people were anticipating the ride and tickets for the first train had sold out in just 15 seconds!

Conclusion

Services for railways change gradually over time. Dining cars flourished and meals were equated with service when railways first started because travel times were long and there was no other way of providing meals. Then meal services changed to selling from buffets and carts as the railway environment changed over time and train speeds increased. Eventually, direct service to customers became mainstream and the value of meal and sales services waned.

Today, cart services sell a line-up of about 70 items, but that may not necessarily be sufficient as customer needs diversify. We still need to analyze customer needs from various standpoints, review the product line, and discover new needs.

At the same time, we need to work to increase the level of safety and customer service. We are only happy when the customer is happy, so we work to improve onboard services by striving to offer the best service. ■



Toshiki Utsu

Mr. Utsu is a subleader of onboard services at JR West Food Service Net.