FAST FOOD/SLOW FOOD

The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System

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Kaiten-zushi and Konbini: Japanese Food Culture in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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This chapter examines two different kinds of commercial establishments engaged in the mass distribution of foodstuffs in Japan, both of which have become sine qua non of the contemporary urban commercial landscape. The first of my two types of examples are known as kaiten-zushi, sometimes translated as “conveyor belt sushi” or “rotary sushi,” restaurants. The second are chain stores known as konbini, “convenience stores” (from a Japanese contraction of the English term convenience), which are discussed in much greater detail in Gavin Whitelaw’s chapter that follows. At first glance, these two examples perhaps appear to have little in common with one another. One is a kind of restaurant; the other is a kind of retailer. One sells fresh or at least perishable prepared dishes, usually consumed on the spot; the other is a purveyor of packaged, processed foodstuffs, usually to be taken away even if not taken home.

But kaiten-zushi and konbini are closely linked phenomena in the production, distribution, and consumption of food in contemporary Japan. The connections, parallels, and contrasts that can be drawn between these two genre of businesses provide broader perspectives on food distribution and consumption as an activity deeply embedded in complex domestic as well as global dynamics of Japanese cuisine, consumption, diet, domesticity, labor, leisure, social structure, and the commercial applications of information technology and standardization.

Both types of retailing have become particularly prominent during and after the economic boom (the so-called “Bubble economy”) of the 1980s, a period of high inflation, conspicuous consumption, and speculative investment that has been followed (since about 1990) by a prolonged domestic recession during which the Japanese retail environment has adjusted dramatically with increased consolidation of large retail chains (and bankruptcies of small enterprises), steady increases in technological sophistication in production and distribution, greater dependence on foreign imports, and waning consumer spending.
My interest in the relatively new popularity of these retail outlets for industrialized fast food started from the perspective of distribution, based on research at Tokyo’s massive Tsukiji wholesale fish market and the supply channels leading to, through, and from it. Tsukiji is the world’s largest marketplace for fresh seafood, a hub in both global and national distribution systems, where changing trends of food supply and Japanese consumption directly affect the business of food and the construction of food culture (T. Bestor 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004, in preparation; V. Bestor 1998). The growth of kaiten-zushi and konbini is not just an incremental perturbation in an already complex system of distribution for seafood and related products; rather, these two commercial forms reflect and have helped effect a complex rewiring of the circuitry of food distribution, both domestically and globally.

Fast Food
In Japan, as is true in many other parts of the world, “fast food” is not a necessarily modern notion. Although sushi has acquired the patina of “high culture”—as something that is simultaneously hip and demanding of connoisseurship both in Japan and in the West—it originated as street food, as pre-industrial fast food, as did many other kinds of Japanese cuisine, such as the onigiri (rice balls) that Gavin Whitelaw discusses in chapter 9. These and many other dishes, including bento (box lunches), yakitori (grilled chicken skewers), ozoni (vegetable stew), and noodle dishes (udon and ramen), have been sold by street vendors for generations, in some cases centuries, and are now also the stock-in-trade for the explicitly “Japanese” segments of the Japanese fast food industry (see also Noguchi 1994).

But the identification of dishes as part of a distinctive “traditional” Japanese cuisine also does not necessarily imply historical stasis. Like all other aspects of “tradition,” food culture constantly evolves. Many dishes and delicacies now widely regarded as hallmarks of Japanese cuisine are actually of relatively recent introduction or invention. For example, even the basic form of nigiri-zushi, a thin slice of fish atop a small block of vinegared rice—the style characteristic of Tokyo’s cuisine and now the world’s de facto sushi standard—was an innovation of the mid-nineteenth century, and many of its contemporary features, including the use of fresh fish (rather than various kinds of pickled or salted seafood), only became possible in the twentieth century with the advent of mechanical refrigeration and ice manufacturing.

The particular style of Edo-Tokyo sushi, called nigiri-zushi (“squeezed” or “hand-molded” sushi) or Edomae-zushi (sushi from “in front of Edo”), became the rage of Edo in the 1820s or 1830s (Nishiyama et al. 1984:259–62). One common story of nigiri-zushi’s origins puts it in the hands of a famed chef, Hanaya Yohei (1799–1858), who invented or perfected the technique in 1824 at his shop in Ryōgoku (then one of Edo’s major entertainment districts), a shop that survived until the 1930s. A nineteenth-century verse celebrated his popular innovation:

Crowded together, weary with waiting
Customers wring their hands
As Yohei squeezes sushi!

Sushi is just one example, but the point is that the dishes served up by kaiten-zushi and konbini have not brought Japanese consumers a new concept of “fast food.” What they have brought is fast food even faster and in enormous but precisely controlled volumes.

Industrial Food
In this volume Sidney Mintz writes about the creation of a new global food system (see also Mintz 1997), and Japanese contemporary fast food is certainly deeply embedded in this global system. Part of this system is what Jack Goody refers to as the “industrialization of cuisine” (Goody 1982), a macroscopic and multifaceted set of transformations in which the entire character of a society’s sustenance—selections of food resources; methods of production and processing; techniques of distribution, sales, and advertising; daily rhythms of eating; the nutritional content of the daily diet; the re-engineering of familiar foods for mass distribution; and the creation of entirely new foodstuffs as well—is adapted to and shaped by industrial, capital-intensive production.

Typically, industrialization of food changes the repertory of goods available to consumers, increasingly substituting highly standardized, processed, and manufactured foodstuffs for widely varied, locally produced, raw and semi-processed ones. The industrialization of food affects consumers, of course, but the transformations are fundamentally propelled by changes in the economic, political, and social institutions that produce, process, and distribute foodstuffs.

Clearly, twentieth- and twenty-first-century technologies of the food industry—including aquaculture, food additives, freeze-drying, high-speed transportation (on a global scale), and mechanical devices to replace hand-processing—have expanded dramatically the ability to invent and produce “new food.” At the same time, new techniques of food processing develop together with new channels of distribution, new kinds of retailers, and new forms of marketing. Proprietary brand names become attached both to newly developed products and to products that previously had been simply generic items from the culinary public domain, and consumers, especially in Japan, come to expect “branded” merchandise, even in culinary domains.
If one looks at the industrialization of cuisine from the perspective of the growth of a “food culture industry,” then it is essential to look across an entire food system as an integrated social and cultural phenomenon, including production, content, and reception. Within the scope of this chapter, I cannot touch on all elements of the Japanese food culture industry, ranging across both symbolic and material substance, including: the material realities of harvesting, shipping, and processing; the social contexts of production, distribution, and consumption; the semi-stable social worlds of producers and the shifting social relations of consumption; the role of the mass media; the symbolism of cuisine and identity; changes in diet and domestic living arrangements; gendered divisions of labor; formal and informal labor markets; issues of food security and insecurity; and the impact of global trade on Japan’s retail and service sectors.

What I focus on are the elements of mass production—even assembly line production—that are at the core of the kaiten-zushi and konbini phenomena, which I conceive of as examples of “Fordist food culture.”

The elements of Fordism are well-known characteristics of industrial societies, and include: the simultaneous development of both mass production and mass consumption; the substitution of industrial for craft production; the development of process engineering and standardization of both production and products; patterns of vertical integration among economic sectors, in order to control information flows and to manage financial risks; and the invention of the de-skilled assembly line.

Second-stage Fordism—the Japanese version perfected during the high-growth years from the 1960s through the 1980s—made some critical refinements to these basic principles. These include: the creation of flexible systems of industrial production, including “just-in-time production” and “just-in-time distribution” partly based on extensive networks of very-well-coordinated subcontractors (dependent not on direct vertical integration but on “relational contracting” among well-established partnerships); philosophies of “total quality management” based on careful collection and statistical analysis of production and distribution information; extremely rapid product cycles; and the micro-segmentation of market niches and product differentiation.3

This second-stage Fordism, the “Model-J” rather than the “Model-T,” enabled the industrial transformation not only of production, but also of the retail and service sectors. Nowhere has that transformation been pushed as relentlessly as in Japan, especially in the 1990s. Time and space have not been annihilated, but have been process-engineered and micro-managed to create ever-finier increments of advantage in distribution, retailing, and the provision of services. Kaiten-zushi and konbini are exemplars of that acceleration.

Kaiten-zushi
Kaiten-zushi ("conveyor-belt sushi" or "rotary sushi") gained wide popularity among consumers during the late 1990s as an inexpensive but increasingly trendy (and increasingly sophisticated) form of consumption. Restaurants that specialize in kaiten-zushi are now ubiquitously part of the urban landscape; some are stand-alone restaurants, others are parts of chains (currently about a dozen national chains exist); their décor ranges from nonexistent to high tech; their common characteristic is an emphasis on low-priced sushi.

Kaiten-zushi arrives on a conveyor belt; kitchen workers make small batches of different kinds of sushi and place them on a moving track, and customers take one plate of this or that. Each serving is priced according to the color or shape of the plate itself, and at the end of a meal, an employee simply sorts and then counts the different kinds of plates the customer has stacked up to calculate the total. Kaiten-zushi shops make a point of their low prices: 100, 150, or 200 yen per serving for basic offerings (roughly $1.00, $1.50, or $2.00 respectively) with higher prices for servings that go around on fancier plates (see figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1. A kaiten-zushi shop’s display, with colored plates indicating prices in Tokyo, 2003. Photograph by T. C. Bestor © 2003.
*Kaiten-zushi* was invented in the 1950s and gained a reputation (deservedly so, in many cases) as quick, cheap, and often tasteless. At wholesale markets like Tsukiji, proprietors of *kaiten-zushi* shops were regarded as bargain hunters, bottom feeders, who bought the cheapest products at the end of the day, items that were overstocked or at the margins of salability. As restaurants, they appealed to a primarily male and often solitary clientele. Such restaurants were places to catch a bite before catching a train; ambience did not come around the belt.

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, a number of factors began to change the character (if not immediately the image) of *kaiten-zushi* shops. One key development, which affected Japanese seafood markets generally, was the decline of the Japanese fishing industry, both in terms of local off-shore production (because of environmental degradation) and the withdrawal of major Japanese fisheries companies from distant water fisheries (because of the shifting geo-politics of fisheries, the expansion of two-hundred-mile fishing zones by many coastal nations, and international criticism of the environmental effects of Japanese fishing fleets). As a result, an increasing proportion of seafood consumed in Japan was imported, often in frozen form and, as food processing technology advanced, often in pre-sliced, portion-controlled packaging. The major Japanese fisheries companies began to shift their focus from direct production to coordination of joint ventures and seafood processing in foreign locations (where labor costs were cheaper than in Japan). Equipment that can skin, de-bone, and custom slice several hundred fish per hour revolutionized the processing of seafood, and super flash freezing (for tuna, to minus 60 degrees Celsius) transformed distribution; in both instances, there was extensive cross-fertilization between European and Japanese manufacturers of processing technologies.

In many ways, therefore, seafood from around the globe became widely available, bypassing established wholesale markets, and sushi shops and other retailers are now able to obtain seafood products in portions and styles that exactly match their needs. At least one major (former) fisheries company has a division that is exclusively focused on the processing and distribution of sushi toppings (*sashimi*). *Kaiten-zushi* restaurants are no longer bargain hunters at Tsukiji; they are more likely now to get their fish from channels that run outside the market than from those within it, and this reflects the growing power of large trading companies active in the food import-export business.

Other technological innovations, on the domestic front, included the development of what are known as "sushi robots," an array of mechanical devices that can automatically cook rice, squeeze it into blocks, and plop precut pieces of fish on top, all in the back room where the conveyor belt slips out of sight. Still others depend on pre-made sushi, often frozen, sometimes prepared overseas and shipped to Japan. Aesthetics aside, these enabled high-speed production of highly standardized sushi that could rely on relatively unskilled (and cheaper) labor.

Another unanticipated boost for *kaiten-zushi* came from abroad. In the 1970s *kaiten-zushi* shops began to appear in a few North American cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York (and later, in the 1980s, in European and Southeast Asian cities; Cwiertka 1999, in preparation; Ng 2001). Non-Japanese clientele were attracted to these restaurants, according to people in the industry, in part by the growing popularity of things Japanese and by the fact that one could see exactly what one was getting without having much if any prior knowledge about sushi; the novelty of Japanese gadgetry—an important aspect of the Western imagery of postwar Japan—was an additional draw. And, as such restaurants acquired a following in foreign cities frequented by Japanese tourists, the idea of *kaiten-zushi* as an aspect of cosmopolitan popular culture was imported back to Japan (Tamamura 2000), a reflection of "Japan's Gross National Cool," a concept now widely embraced within Japan (McGray 2002).

In the Japanese recession of the 1990s, *kaiten-zushi* became widely popular at home and its image (and quality) dramatically improved (Akamoto 2002; Anonymous 2001; Watanabe 2002; Yagyu 2003). Its newfound popularity (and the idea—oxymoronic to some—of gourmet *kaiten-zushi*) reflects the impact of the recession on consumer spending habits and the wider availability of inexpensive imported seafood (mentioned previously). In addition, the technology of the fast-food industry more generally has been applied to sushi: careful portion control, scanners that can read barcodes or microchips embedded in each plate, and low-paid staff who simply assemble sushi rather than master it.

A major aspect of its appeal is in the demystification of production and consumption. "Traditional" sushi shops—at least during the past generation or two—implicitly valorized the expertise of the *itamae-san*, the sushi chef, as a skilled and discerning *shokunin* (artisan), whose discernment and connoisseurship rendered the customer a passive agent. Many upscale sushi shops were largely male domains where businessmen on expense accounts entertained themselves and developed personal ties with particular chefs. Knowing and trusting a good chef was a sign of a certain kind of consumer connoisseurship, in which price was no object. Young couples, let alone young women on their own, were rarely part of the scene, and for a casual customer, someone who was not an expense-account regular, waiting for the bill—in a system where prices were rarely posted—could be a tense experience.

*Kaiten-zushi* demystifies the expertise, the discrimination, of the chef, and makes prices transparent. The popularity of *kaiten-zushi* therefore reflects a desire on the part of consumers to know what the meal will cost. The sushi on the conveyor belt provides direct information about what is available (just as, for generations, many..."
Japanese restaurants have displayed extremely accurate plastic models (mohon) of their menus in shop windows so that customers can see exactly what their order will look like). Contemporary kaiten-zushi shops also have opened consumption up to a much wider spectrum of ages (and genders) and have enabled a feeling of relaxation (or anonymity) that results from uncoupling a meal from one’s interactions or relationships with the chef. The chef is no longer an auteur nor an artisan, but simply a service worker in a convivial setting, and a person with whom you do not really need to interact, unless you want to. The automat has been reborn.

Konbini

Konbini are franchised chains of “convenience stores” such as 7-Eleven, Lawson, Family Mart, Sunkus, and AM-PM, whose stock-in-trade are ready-to-eat meals, box lunches, and highly processed snack foods. In many Japanese urban areas, konbini have all but replaced traditional small-scale food sellers, especially since the late 1980s.

The first Japanese chain of convenience stores began operation in 1969. Many of the currently dominant chains had their start as joint ventures between American franchise chains and large Japanese trading companies and retail stores; initially, the Japanese side’s interest was in acquiring the management expertise for developing highly standardized franchising chains and in training franchisees and workers in highly standardized work routines. Between 1975 and 1995, the number of konbini outlets in Japan rose 1600 percent, from about 2,500 to approximately 40,000, a number that has now increased by several fold. As of 1996, one survey estimated that there was one convenience store for every 3,100 residents of Japan; in some urban areas, the density of konbini was one per 1,500 residents (Yamashita 1998). In 2005, I personally stood on a street corner in central Tokyo where I could swivel my neck and see six konbini (three of them outlets from a single chain).

Konbini are medium-sized, brightly lighted, streamlined shops, usually open twenty-four hours a day and generally located in high-traffic sites. The stores sell ready-to-eat and simple packaged foods, beverages, magazines, toiletries, and basic household goods. Initially, konbini were popular primarily with young adults and commuters, but their appeal has spread and their repertoire has expanded enormously. They have become general stores, touted as “lifestyle centers,” for young, mobile, free-spending Japanese consumers. They are popular (for many consumers, but not all) because of their hours, the careful branding both of chains and the goods they carry, and the almost total anonymity of the shopping experience; one does not chat or gossip with a konbini employee as they scan your purchases.

Current konbini services include: selling computer software; providing copying and fax services; offering downloads of music CDs; selling postage stamps and telephone cards; selling tokens for toll expressways; and acting as rail and airline reservation agents. Konbini serve as a customer’s point for picking up and paying for products ordered over the internet directly from other companies. The advantages for consumers are that they do not have to use a credit card over the internet and that they can arrange for delivery at a time and place convenient for their daily commute (for example, ordering online from their office for a product to be picked up at a branch near their apartment that evening). Konbini are also closely linked to the ubiquitous “home delivery services” (takkyubin) that can send a purchase (or deliver something to a konbini pick-up point) almost any place in Japan within twenty-four hours.

Food remains the mainstay of konbini, however. Konbini benefit from long-established patterns in Japanese shopping behavior—frequent shopping trips for small quantities—which reflect a combination of consumer preference for daily shopping with practical limitations on domestic storage space in densely populated Japanese cities. Small-scale, family-owned shops have been a major feature of the urban retail, wholesale, and service sectors for generations, and, traditionally, urban neighborhoods were dotted with small-scale shops strung along shopping streets or arcades (known as shōtengai) that enabled residents to shop quickly, often, and close to home. Konbini are heir to this shopping and retailing pattern, but without any of the social relationships that typically existed between shop owner and customer.

During the enduring Japanese economic slump since the late 1980s, konbini chains have increased their market share vis-à-vis other categories of large-scale retailers such as supermarket chains and department stores. In 2000, the konbini retail sector had an estimated sales volume of six trillion yen, roughly 70 percent of the total sales of department stores and 40 percent of supermarket sales (according to unpublished figures from the Ministry of External Trade and Industry). For many young and single consumers (and some who are neither), a convenience store is the local food store.

Large trading firms actively developed konbini as a strategy to work around restrictions on the size and scale of retail stores (under Japan’s Large Retail Store Law) which effectively prevented the expansion of supermarkets and department stores into many commercial districts and most residential neighborhoods; the compact size of konbini sets them outside the scope of restrictive law. Building on franchising know-how initially acquired from American retailers, major Japanese trading and retailing corporations engineered ultrasophisticated distribution and inventory systems appropriate to dense networks of small-scale outlets and adapted to the geographic, social, and consumer contexts of contemporary Japan. Food processors have devoted enormous attention to creating products specifically suited to konbini product cycles. And, as with kaiten-zushi shops, supply channels flow through large trading companies and their domestic and overseas subcontractors; seafood,
for example, is obtained by direct imports, processed in central commissaries, and delivered as box lunches, sushi rolls, or stuffed rice balls direct to shops, in several deliveries a day. Konbini and supermarkets, along with chain restaurants of all genres, have effectively excluded wholesale markets from their supply chains.

7-Eleven, in particular, is noted for pioneering a retail “just-in-time” distribution and inventory system, which relies on deliveries daily or more often. Their system incorporates sophisticated real-time point-of-sale data collection for inventory control and ordering, as well as consumer analysis and market forecasting. The aggressive use of information technology by konbini has also enabled the big chains to become major providers of a wide (and increasingly wider) range of electronic services for customers, and they have moved aggressively into e-commerce (examples of which are mentioned previously), through links made with major Japanese manufacturers and merchandisers.

The extensive technological know-how and infrastructure provided by large konbini chains has been a critical factor in their successful marketing of franchises to local business people, many of whom have converted old-line specialized retail shops—corner grocers, rice shops, or liquor stores—into konbini. Many family-owned businesses occupy valuable commercial locations, but in the past generation this small-scale sector of the economy has faced enormous labor difficulties, between the aging of the population engaged in family enterprises and the reluctance of children to follow in parental footsteps and take over the businesses. Konbini therefore offer many small-scale family businesses a good opportunity to capitalize on real estate assets and to retain ownership of a local business, much of the management of which is embedded in the technical know-how and efficiently engineered distribution systems of the large franchise chains. These systems may rely on hands-on management by local proprietors, but that management is framed by chain policies, and the stores themselves can be operated largely with relatively low-cost, low-skilled retail labor. Many stores rely to a great extent on part-time labor (for example, college students and housewives, as well as on the new working class of “freeters” or “free-timers,” semipermanent part-time workers).

**Fordist Fast Food and Its Discontents**

My description and discussion of kaiten-zushi shops and konbini stores has necessarily been brief and schematic. But some of the commonalities of these two relatively new forms of retailing seem quite clear. In the first instance, they both represent substantial breaks from or transformation of the traditional small-scale sectors of the urban Japanese retail and service economy. Many of their common features reflect aspects of what I call Model-J Fordism, but perhaps an even later model that includes an enormously expanded reliance on global flows of capital, managerial know-how, technological innovation (both in production and information management), and supply networks of foodstuffs, both raw and processed. Both konbini and kaiten-zushi shops have resulted directly (in the case of konbini) and indirectly from huge investments by large corporations, especially Japanese general trading companies, both in Japan and overseas, and from structural realignments within the Japanese fishing and food industries. Both have benefited from sophisticated process-engineering, which in turn relies on intensive use of information technology, including extremely sophisticated POS (point of sales) data collection for inventory control, scheduling of micro-customized deliveries, control of labor costs, and micro-analysis of consumer behavior (known as “data mining”). And both kinds of establishments make use of new managerial models of franchising, which rely on de-skilled labor performing repetitive tasks according to pre-established scripts.

And both kinds of shops are wildly popular. They obviously cater to consumer demand with extreme efficiency, not only in the range of products they provide but also in the social contexts of consumption they establish (or overthrow).

The success of Model-J Fordism as it has been applied to the Japanese retail and service sectors, however, has also spawned controversy, feeding into various of the “moral panics” that regularly sweep through Japan’s mass media and the statements of conservative politicians.

Critics of konbini and kaiten-zushi see them as garishly intrusive shops that purvey a highly impersonal popular culture of consumption that especially targets alienated teenagers and young adults, and indeed encourages that social alienation. The homogenization of foodways and the disappearance of local foodstuffs and specialty dishes is a cause for concern among some, as is the realization that younger Japanese neither know very much about eating Japanese cuisine nor how to prepare it themselves. Equally, these fast-food outlets, of whatever stripe, are seen to destroy local retail competitors and push aside local production and distribution networks in favor of highly centralized major corporations. This economic trend has the side effect of hollowing out the social infrastructure of regional and community life.

Of course, another one of the raps against chain stores is the quality of the food they provide. There is a standard indictment of a nutritional wasteland: preservatives, additives, high sodium, high sugar, high starch, high calories. And in my own informal surveys of the shelves of konbini, I have noted that they rarely stock many foodstuffs that would qualify as “ingredients”: things out of which one could construct another dish. There is milk, cheese, butter, eggs, tofu, miso paste, maybe a potato, an onion, a carrot, an orange or a banana (each individually wrapped in plastic), salt, pepper, and sugar, but rarely any other vegetables, fruits. Is there fresh fish, meat, or poultry. Konbini food is off the rack. (No doubt some future marketing campaign will tout this as “prêt-a-porter” cuisine.)
Konbini shoppers are themselves pathologized. The pejorative term konbini housewife floats around as a scornful comment directed toward young (and some not-so-young) homemakers who rely almost entirely on the pre-packaged and ready-to-eat foodstuffs in which konbini specialize; these homemakers hence are assumed to be unable or unwilling to perform the normative role of “good wife and wise mother.” A Japanese physician recently announced the results of his research on adolescents who hang out at konbini, and made a claim that the excessive lighting in such stores (about 2,000 lux compared to 900 lux in typical residential space) creates mood disorders. Concerns about crime and public safety often attach themselves to konbini.

Another nutritionist has calculated the amount of chewing required to eat meals from konbini compared with “traditional” meals and claims that today’s “soft” cuisine is reshaping the musculature of the jaw and hence the facial shapes of young Japanese (Yamashita 1998). And the anonymity of kaiten-zushi and other fast-food restaurants are thought by some to reflect or encourage a form of extreme withdrawal from everyday social contacts that is currently seen as a major problem among young people.

Linguistically, konbini and the new service sector have brought criticism as well. Many older Japanese react negatively to the “service voices” that chain store workers affect. Part of it is corporate scripts; some konbini chains instruct their employees to greet each customer with the jarring expression: “Konnichi wa, Irrashaimase!” Simply translated, this and equivalent phrases simply say, “Good day! Welcome!” This may be grating because the traditional mercantile greeting is simply “Irrashaimase!” (Welcome!) spoken in a variety of registers, none of them requiring a customer’s response. “Konnichi wa,” however, is a cue to interaction; sociolinguistically it requires a response. “Howya doin’?” “Fine thanks.” It is a linguistic stealth tactic to get customers to interact with employees, and, according to people in the business, the commercial logic is twofold. First, even minimal interaction is more likely to lead to purchases, but second and more important, interaction dampens the likelihood of shoplifting: pilferage is a major problem in the anonymous world of konbini.

Another linguistic annoyance is the affectless, robotic voices that young workers use, seemingly modeled on the speech patterns of video games. For older Japanese, this monotonous, nasal voice is a marker of the “free-timer” phenomenon, the Japanese equivalent of “Generation X,” the young part-time workers who are criticized by their elders for a lack of ambition and work ethic, but who—in their defense—are cast into an economy where the only growth sector is in dead-end, de-skilled service jobs.

Conclusion

Taken together, these and other critiques point toward the loss of what Sidney Mintz describes elsewhere in this volume as “the thick texture of daily interaction” that underlies the sociability inherent in local and regional food systems. The circumstances of kaiten-zushi and konbini reflect the ascendance of what Mintz calls “the freedom from intimacy.” Although Japanese pundits, politicians, and business people congratulate themselves on Japan’s success in revolutionizing mass consumption, seeing this as an exportable commodity, as part of Japan’s new “Gross National Cool” (McGray 2002), this freedom from intimacy engendered by the automation and process-engineering of mass consumption may raise other significant issues.

The dependence of these highly engineered food systems that rely on the mass and rapid distribution of food from distant and unknowable sources, handled by gigantic and impersonal multinational firms, gives rise to what I call “fast food monoculture,” highly susceptible, culturally, to almost instantaneous panics over food safety and the contaminations of globalization. And, given the well-documented ability of Japanese mass media to seize on issues of food safety and global risk, recently including t. coli, BSE, GMOs, avian flu, and SARS, highly publicized outbreaks or fears of food safety may immediately disrupt Japanese distribution channels on hitherto unimaginable scales and send shock waves throughout the global food system.

And, although the new Japanese food system is inherently dependent on the globalization of food supply, technological innovations, and managerial skills and corporate forms, I would argue that the controversies or moral panics about the domestic changes wrought by (or reflected in) konbini, kaiten-zushi, and many related genres of business, are much less about domestic change than they are indications of profound ambivalence in contemporary Japan about globalization, perceived as an external rather than an internal or interdependent phenomenon.

Notes

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1. The humor of the original verse is in the word nigiru, used in two senses: wringing one’s hands in anticipation, and molding or squeezing rice for sushi, which is known also as nigiri-zushi (“hand-molded sushi”).

2. Throughout this chapter I restrict my discussion of “fast food” to culinary genres that are identified by contemporary Japanese as distinctively “Japanese” dishes, and exclude
discussion of hamburgers, fried chicken, curried rice, donuts, ice cream, pizza, and coffee, all of which are also major segments of the contemporary "fast food" industry in Japan.

3. Many anthropologists have focused recently on the culture of capitalism and on "multiple capitalism" as distinct cultural and social forms in different societies (see, for example, Blum 2000; Miller 1997). Japanese economic organization itself has been the object of debates about specific cultural and social characteristics of capitalism (T. Bestor 2004, ch. 1). Business and political commentators have at various times either lauded the Japanese economy as a harbinger of future forms of global capitalism based on tight integration and coordination among government, business, and labor (e.g., Johnson 1982), or condemned it as a highly insular, inefficient, and intensely corrupt system that works against consumer interests (van Wolferen 1990).

4. By Japanese restaurant chain standards, the kaiten-zushi chains are quite small: the largest consists of only 250 shops, whereas the largest chains serving "Western" food (e.g., McDonalds, KFC, or Starbucks) each have thousands of outlets (Anon. 2001).

5. The 7-Eleven chain of convenience stores is owned in both Japan and the United States by the Japanese retailing giant, Ito Yōkādō. In 1973, Ito Yōkada opened its first convenience store in Japan under license from the Southland Corporation, the Texas-based originator of the 7-Eleven franchise, and it began to use the 7-Eleven name in Japan in 1978. In 1991, Ito Yōkadō acquired 70 percent of the shares of the Southland Corporation. In 1993, the 5,000th Japanese 7-Eleven store was opened, according to the 7-Eleven website.

6. Occasional surveys on shopping patterns for perishable foodstuffs conducted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government illustrate larger shifts within which the konbini boom has occurred. In 1996, shoppers in their twenties were most likely to patronize small supermarkets and convenience stores (30.4 percent); those in their thirties were most partial to large supermarkets (36.0 percent); and shoppers over the age of sixty favored retail fishmongers (37.1 percent). During the preceding five years, consumers who shopped regularly at retail fishmongers declined by more than 20 percent and those who shopped in supermarkets and convenience stores increased by 16 percent (Tōkyō-to 1992:108; 1995:119; 1996:8–13).

7. I have had several opportunities to visit konbini with food chemists from one of Japan's leading food additive manufacturers. My chemist guides are intimately familiar with almost every product on konbini shelves and how they have been engineered to specifically meet the needs of konbini sales. They tell me that among many other projects, they are actively working on ways to recreate the smell of freshly cooked rice for pre-packaged meals, to duplicate the freshly made "sushi smell" for box lunches, and to mask the subtly different flavor of imported Chinese-raised eels, which are used in the traditional summer delicacy of kōbō-ya (grilled eel).

8. A national government survey of 3,000 adults, conducted in 2005, found that overall 57 percent of respondents (88 percent of respondents in their 20s, 82 percent in their 30s, and 70 percent in their 40s) considered late-night or 24-hour convenience stores to be a "necessity." However, 41 percent of respondents overall regarded convenience stores as having a negative influence on youth, 28 percent were concerned about noise, and 27 percent worried about crime and safety around such stores (Japan Times, July 17, 2005:2).

References


Rice Ball Rivalries: Japanese Convenience Stores and the Appetite of Late Capitalism

GA VIN HAMILTON WHITELAW

SIMPLE IN INGREDIENTS and easy to make, the rice ball, or onigiri, is one of Japan’s oldest “fast foods” and the nation’s ultimate convenience meal. Japan’s rice ball roots are traceable back to the Heian period. Ancient court poetry and military ballads celebrated the onigiri’s portability and the fact that no plate was required for it to be served. While some of the onigiri’s ingredients have changed with time, its basic form has not. Consisting of a heaping fistful of rice pressed into a round, cylindrical, or triangular shape, the onigiri is a fast food at its slowest—a convenient meal whose shape literally bears the mark of its maker. Its very name comes from the verb nigorī, meaning to press or pack together with one’s hands. Today, onigiri remain a common food for those on the move. They are eaten for lunch by school children and harried workers, carried in hikers’ backpacks, handed out at community events, and even dispensed as emergency rations in the wake of disasters. Although still seen as an easy way to quickly feed a large number of people or to conveniently use up leftover rice from the previous night’s meal, the onigiri image has evolved from that of a traditional family food to one that is purchased outside of the home, in stores and supermarkets.

Perhaps no retail industry relies on the onigiri more than Japan’s convenience stores. For konbini (the Japanese contraction for “convenience store”), the rice ball plays an important role in redefining convenience and establishing chain distinction. Shortly after the American convenience store franchise model was introduced to Japan in the late 1960s, the onigiri became a key product in domesticating the foreign retail form for the Japanese palate. Corporations seeking to provide a familiar, convenient, and freshly packaged food that would still be considered a meal by the Japanese consumer embraced the onigiri. This attention to the rice ball led to innovations in its production and content. Today, the onigiri remains a focus of creativity, profit, and competition. Onigiri are available in various shapes and sizes. Their flavorful fillings range from pickled plum and tuna-and-mayo to kimchi and Hokkaido salmon. Priced between 85 and 260 yen apiece, the onigiri is a
multi-billion-yen business for Japan’s convenience store franchises. 7-Eleven Japan alone sold 1.4 billion onigiri in 2003 (Yoshioka 2005:17), the statistical equivalent of eight rice balls for every Japanese man, woman, and child. 

In this chapter, I explore the onigiri’s commodification by Japan’s convenience store industry. I argue that the onigiri’s “convenience” as a product is linked to the food’s rich cultural resonance that companies hope to freely tap. However, the corporate embrace of the culturally value-added onigiri and the phenomenon of commodification that the food undergoes is not a simple process with predetermined outcomes. Drawing on particular case studies, my research points to tensions inherent in late “consumer” capitalism and its concomitant tendencies to commercialize private needs and increase industrial efficiency. Rather than eroding the rice ball’s store of cultural meanings, the contradictions between the onigiri’s commodity nature and its emotional, cultural, and historical significance have contributed new meanings to the food itself.

The Onigiri: From the Heian Court to Heisei Households

People have made and consumed the rice ball in Japan for millennia. Heian Period (794 A.D.–1192 A.D.) court documents mention ceremonial exchanges of dense, egg-shaped bundles of glutinous rice between aristocratic households and loyal vassals. Ancient military ballads also contain references to the onigiri. Rice balls could be produced in bulk, rapidly distributed, carried into battle, and consumed when necessary. Fillers such as bean, millet, and wild vegetables weakened the rice ball’s cohesiveness, making it necessary to wrap or bind (musubi) the rice ball together with large leaves or rice straw. The term omusubi is still used as an alternative word for onigiri, although seaweed and plastic wrap have replaced the leaves and straw of yore.

During the Meiji Restoration (1865–1912), agricultural reforms coupled with improvements in transportation and distribution helped make rice a more prominent part of the Japanese diet. The onigiri punctuated particular moments of the nation-state’s expansion into everyday social life. One milestone was the opening of Japan’s first rail line. In 1885, the national railway approved the sale of the first ekiben (train station lunchbox), which contained two rice balls lightly seasoned with sesame salt (gomasio) as a preservative. The Ministry of Education’s first school lunch program, piloted at a rural northern elementary school in 1889, also featured the rice ball. The onigiri remains on school lunch menus to this day.

Although the appearance of onigiri in school lunches and in train station food stalls are important developments in the rice ball’s modern historical trajectory, undoubtedly the onigiri’s strongest set of associations is with the home, family, and motherhood. For many Japanese, the onigiri is seen as a “comfort food,” one that reflects the skill, nutritional acumen, and even flavor of the mother and wife. More akin to the matzo ball than the hamburger, the onigiri is a culinary composition whose external simplicity often belies its internal complexity. According to popular women’s magazines, the onigiri’s ingredients must be carefully chosen. Beginning with grades of rice and nori (seaweed) and proceeding through a myriad of fillings such as pickled plum, grilled salmon, and marinated sea kelp, every component of the rice ball is a decision unto itself. Attention paid to using a particularly famous regional product (megutsu) or a seasonally appropriate ingredient bespeaks not only the housewife’s knowledge but also the degree to which she cares about what her family ingests.

The onigiri is as much about form as content. Its size and shape are literally determined by the hands of the creator. Some scientists have gone so far as to study how naturally occurring salts and oils from the woman’s palms subtly alter the taste of rice, thus giving the homemade onigiri a distinct flavor that is traceable to the mother who created it. The onigiri’s ability to connect the child to the home and caregiver has been reinforced, and some might argue exploited, by the state educational system. A majority of Japanese nursery schools and kindergartens do not offer lunch programs, thus making parents, usually mothers, responsible for creating a lunch box (obento) filled with tasty, easy-to-consume foods like onigiri. Anthropologist Anne Allison argues that such a lunch box policy serves the dual purpose of reinforcing a gendered state ideology while opening the household to a subtle yet effective form of surveillance. Through the daily production and consumption of lunch boxes, both mother and the child are observed, judged, and disciplined by school officials and, by extension, the national education system (Allison 1996). Teachers and school officials critique the mothers’ obento-making skills from nutritional and aesthetic standpoints. A half-eaten onigiri will accompany the child back to the home and kitchen along with a note from the teacher on how to improve tomorrow’s meal.

The critical role of homemade lunch box design in a child’s (and family’s) early educational evaluation has spawned a minor media industry focusing on obento menu ideas. As a popular component of the obento repertoire, the onigiri is reinvented monthly in magazines and TV cooking programs. The homey rice ball becomes a canvas on which a mother may exercise her expertise and creativity. The strategic placement of strips of seaweed and circles of processed cheese on a ball of rice by loving hands transform an onigiri into the face of a cat or a panda. In recent years, the attention given to obento has generated problems of its own. Lunch box creativity wars among overly zealous mothers led some kindergartens to instruct parents to pack only onigiri in hopes of toning down the competitive drive toward more elaborate boxed meals (Iwamura 2004).
The onigiri’s power as a cultural symbol continues to be reinforced in folktales and films where rice ball production and consumption embody care, loyalty, and magic. In popular children’s stories, like Sarukani Gassen (“Showdown between the Monkey and the Crab”) and Omusubi Korin (“The Tumbling Rice Ball”), the gift of a rice ball, even when by accident, ultimately leads to reciprocity, prosperity, and deeper interpersonal ties. Even contemporary storytelling makes use of the onigiri’s magical dimensions. A pivotal moment in the Academy Award–winning animated film Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (“Spirited Away”) occurs when the young heroine, Chihiro, accepts a rice ball from her dragon-prince friend, Taku. The strength Chihiro gains from her meal enables her to undo an evil spell that turned her parents into swine and Taku into a fantastical beast. When asked why so many Japanese viewers cry as Chihiro eats her onigiri, film director Miyazaki Hayao explains that the scene is a powerful reminder of commensality and human interdependence. “As a child or a parent, you understand that the onigiri is a food sculpted by the hands of someone you know and whose tireless efforts give you life” (Miyazaki 2002). For Miyazaki, the rice ball is infused with a kind of emotional magic powerful enough to humanize, or rehumanize, his story’s animated characters.

Stories about the onigiri’s power are not limited, however, to folktales and popular films. As a commercially mass-packaged packaged food, the onigiri is one of the best-selling items in Japanese convenience stores. Beyond its material importance, the life of the onigiri as a processed industrial food is so closely tied to the growth of Japan’s konbini industry that the development of some chains parallels advances in rice ball production and marketing. Japan’s two largest convenience store chains, 7-Eleven Japan, the originator of the packaged onigiri, and its rival Lawson, are illustrative examples.

**Onigiri, 7-Eleven Japan, and the Rise of the Konbini**

Although not Japan’s first convenience store, 7-Eleven Japan and its early success in localizing a new retail system through meeting consumer needs and satisfying franchisees made it a galvanizing force in the industry—the chain to watch and the chain to beat. A cornerstone of 7-Eleven’s marketing strategy was to provide pre-prepared foods that appealed to the Japanese palate. The onigiri played a decisive part in this plan. 7-Eleven Japan introduced the onigiri to the marketplace of industrial cuisine in 1978 when it launched the industry’s first line of packaged rice balls in a hundred of its fledgling franchises.

In 1978, the convenience store retail format was still a new phenomena in Japan. Only five years earlier, Tokyo-based retail corporation, Ito-Yokado, imported the American 7-Eleven name and store manual to Japan. Ito-Yokado used 7-Eleven’s franchise system to “collaborate” with local merchants to modernize existing local, privately owned and operated establishments. The convenience store’s small-scale format also gave Ito-Yokado a means for sidestepping restrictive legislation prohibiting big corporations from building large-scale outlets in residential neighborhoods and shopping districts. 7-Eleven’s expansion was slow, fraught with logistical problems, store management missteps, product line failures, and resistance from shop owner associations. The Japanese company, conscious of the need to build a customer base for its stores, readily broke from the American marketing script of hotdogs and flavored Slurpee offerings and explored “new” types of convenience foods that would appeal to a hungry Japanese consumer. The onigiri was an obvious choice. Its size, relative ease of preparation, and the possibilities for value-added innovation through fillings, shapes, and flavors contributed to its strong potential as a konbini food. More critical still was the rice ball’s social and symbolic standing in the Japanese diet. As a rice-based food, the onigiri was more immediately seen as a “meal” than a “snack” in the eyes of Japanese consumers (see Watson 1997). Furthermore, the onigiri’s long history and associations with the home, portability, and quick sustenance helped differentiate it from other “foreign” fast foods that required intense marketing efforts to win over public recognition and acceptance. The onigiri could be used to draw upon cultural associations and assist the konbini to convey a sense of care and familiarity, qualities that served to tone down the shop’s American origins and its impersonal chain store image.

7-Eleven Japan oversaw the creation of its convenience store onigiri from ingredients and packaging to distribution and display. The first hurdle the company had to overcome was with production. 7-Eleven combed a Tokyo phone directory cover to cover before it was able to find a food maker willing to commercially mass-produce the rice ball (Yoshioka 2005:16). Despite the onigiri’s compositional simplicity, production still literally required many hands to pack and wrap the cooked rice. Most food makers were unwilling to add an additional production line for what was at that time a commercially untested product. Eventually, however, a producer was secured and the onigiri began to appear on store shelves in Tokyo neighborhoods.

The company’s next challenge was the customer. Stores initially sold an average of five or six onigiri per day. “Everyone thought that the onigiri wouldn’t sell,” admitted Sawada Kazuhiro, 7-Eleven Japan’s food product senior merchandiser, “but we recognized the latent potential of this product and we refused to give up” (Yoshioka 2005:16). The company fielded complaints ranging from the onigiri’s taste and the hardness of the rice to problems with product irregularity. In short, the convenience store onigiri was not quite “like mom’s.” 7-Eleven officials realized that “to capture the latent demand for such products it would need to improve their quality” (Bernstein 1997:514).

Over the next several decades, 7-Eleven Japan introduced numerous innovations in the onigiri’s display, packaging, and production to help broaden the product’s
appeal. The company placed open refrigerated cases in its stores so that onigiri could be stocked alongside bentō and other take-out foods. Initially, the triangular onigiri were covered in nori before being packaged, but between manufacture and sale the nori became soggy and sticky. In 1984, 7-Eleven developed a more advanced packaging system to deal with this problem. Referred to as the “parachute” wrap, an additional layer of plastic kept the seaweed crisp and separate from the rice until the onigiri was ready to be eaten. The purchaser removed the protective layer of plastic and manually enveloped the rice ball in seaweed, thus completing the final step in the process of making a homemade onigiri. In 1989, the “one hand” wrapping system replaced the parachute wrap. Pinching firmly on a colored plastic tab, the customer tears open the onigiri package with a single hand motion. The outer and inner layers of plastic are then removed by pulling on the corners of the package. 7-Eleven’s innovations in packaging were mimicked by other convenience store and supermarket chains.

As part of an overall effort to standardize and improve the freshness of its pre-made food products, 7-Eleven reorganized the manufacturing and distribution processes. It established a cooperative association to help small firms with food production and management. Initially it contracted with ten smaller-scale makers to produce its rice-based foods. In exchange for their compliance with company standards like ingredients, cooking temperatures, and packaging requirements, 7-Eleven agreed to be the primary buyer of the group’s output. By the 1990s the association had expanded to over one hundred firms with internal divisions overseeing such areas as bulk purchasing of raw materials as well as research and development of food products like onigiri. In 2003, this integrated association of food makers proved instrumental in launching 7-Eleven’s “Rice Ball Revolution” (Onigiri Kakume). Under increasing competitive pressure by other convenience store chains, including Lawson, 7-Eleven developed a new mechanized system for creating onigiri. The focus was on preserving the softness of the rice and producing an onigiri that “tasted as if it was made by mother’s own hands” (Yoshioka 2005:14). The “revolutionary” step is a specially designed heating unit that dispatches a quick blast of warm air into the hollowed out center of the onigiri before a filling, like pickled plum or cooked salmon, is added. The warm air separates the individual grains of cooked rice, preserves softness, and helps to capture the flavor of the filling.

From the beginning, producing a good-tasting product was not enough for 7-Eleven. Equally critical was improving ordering accuracy and speed through the development and implementation of an information technology system. The same year that 7-Eleven Japan launched its first onigiri line, it also initiated what would grow to become a powerful and comprehensive technological infrastructure linking the corporation with manufacturers, distributors, and corner stores. In its earliest stages, the system was simply handwritten order slips filled out by store owners and sent to 7-Eleven headquarters. The head office put together the orders and relayed them to the food manufacturers. The turnaround time between store order and delivery took a week or more. Upgraded eighty times, today the system is a store-based computerized network of Point of Sales (POS) terminals capable of seamlessly relaying sales information in real time. Turnaround times for most products have been reduced to just over twenty-four hours.

The POS terminal fuses the cash register with 7-Eleven’s in-store product ordering system and a mainframe computer at 7-Eleven’s headquarters. The system keeps track of what is sold and allows the store to gather consumer data with each transaction. While stocking the shelves, store clerks scan items into the system using a wireless, hand-held bar code reader. During checkout, product bar codes are again scanned at the register. This information is automatically combined with data such as the time, date, and weather conditions. By pressing a single key on the computerized register at the end of the sale, the store employee inconspicuously inputs the customer’s gender and age category. By the time the cash drawer springs open and the clerk begins to count change, the entire “transaction” has been electronically relayed as a complete data package to 7-Eleven headquarters where it is analyzed. An hour later the output is fed to manufacturers and back to store owners themselves, appearing as flow charts and graphs on the store computer located in the shop’s back room. This system has proven invaluable in assisting manufacturers to create onigiri on demand. It has also enabled 7-Eleven Japan to generate customer profiles for its onigiri products. 7-Eleven Japan uses this data to advise store owners about how to adjust their offerings to suit the particular tastes of local consumers.

Today all of Japan’s major konbini chains have followed 7-Eleven’s lead by adopting and developing their own POS register systems. Consequently, a majority of the nation’s forty-two thousand convenience stores are considerably more attuned to the purchasing habits of their customers. While the konbini is not a substitute for mother, the stores constant strive to better predict what kinds of onigiri people will want and when they will want them. It is not uncommon to hear local residents living by themselves refer to konbini as “replacement refrigerators” (nizōke no kawari). Japan’s convenience stores are oases of pre-prepared foods, like onigiri, for people without a mom around.

Onigiri continue to be one of the key products through which convenience store corporations seek to distinguish themselves and generate the kind of customer loyalty that will keep consumers flowing into their stores and not those of their rivals. Although 7-Eleven Japan played a considerable role in the initial mass production and marketing of the onigiri, Japan’s second largest convenience store chain, Lawson, raised the bar of onigiri development a notch higher by using the onigiri as the flagship of its brand revitalization campaign.
Corporate Soul Food: “I Love Lawson Onigiri Project”

In 2001, the future of Lawson seemed uncertain. Its parent company, the large retail magnate Daiei, was on the verge of bankruptcy, individual franchisees profits were falling due to an increasingly competitive retail market, and the Lawson brand name image as a provider of safe food had been tarnished by a product scandal. The chain’s restructuring began with the hiring of a young new company president and, under his guidance, the development, marketing, and launch of a gourmet line of rice balls under the moniker Onigiri-ya (“Rice Ball Shop”). In less than a year, the Onigiri-ya campaign netted the company a healthy profit and reaffirmed Lawson’s image in the eyes of the consumer and its franchisees. The campaign defied the conventional wisdom at the time. Despite Japan’s lackluster economy and depressed consumer spending, Lawson priced its Onigiri-ya rice balls ¥100 to ¥130 (approximately $1.00 to $1.30) above the national convenience store average. What seemed like a risky move was, in fact, a shrewd strategy for invigorating sales.

The Onigiri-ya campaign was the brainchild of Niinami Takeshi, a forty-four-year-old executive from Lawson’s new corporate retainer, trading company Mitsubishi Shoji. Wielding an MBA from Harvard, Niinami had proven his skill while serving as the marketing manager for Mitsubishi Shoji’s Kentucky Fried Chicken account. Immediately after assuming his position as Lawson company head, Niinami set to work on an onigiri campaign that he hoped would rekindle Lawson’s image as a name consumers could trust. On the eve of Niinami’s appointment, a slice of flesh from a fingertip had been discovered in an onigiri purchased at a Lawson store in the northern Japanese city of Sendai. The media attention concerning this incident was swift and the consumer-related fallout immediate. Lawson food sales dropped and stock prices dipped while those of its major competitors, 7-Eleven and FamilyMart, rose. The incident was a harsh reminder of how carefully food quality was monitored and of the overnight impact that a mishap could have in a cutthroat retail environment where the competition was literally on the next corner.

For Niinami the rice ball project was as much a new business model as a product confidence campaign. Onigiri-ya had two interrelated goals: to please customers with a quality product and to reaffirm confidence among the members of the “Lawson family”—from company employees through to franchisees and manufacturers. The new Lawson image was not being constructed for either the public or the company’s employees (Marchand 1998:44), but rather for both audiences simultaneously. In a TV-Tokyo interview, Niinami explained, “Onigiri-ya equals the ‘New Lawson’, that is the impression we are striving for... If I can do all that then I will be happy with this as a business model” (TV-Tokyo 2003).

From its inception, the onigiri project was decidedly different from other product creation enterprises. The development portion of the Onigiri-ya campaign was titled “I Love Lawson Onigiri Project” and the development team consisted of product development division representatives as well as a cross-section of company employees from various other divisions and departments. Secretaries, middle management, and executives were included in the initial decision-making stages. For several months, the teams met on a regular basis. Lunch breaks became gastronomic overtimes as members sampled different types of rice balls, ranked what they ate, and gave opinions on what needed to change in order to create an onigiri “with impact” (TV-Tokyo 2003).

Outside of the office, Niinami sold the Onigiri-ya project to the company’s 7,600 franchisees as a way to reinvigorate profits. Onigiri are not only one of the best-selling items in convenience stores, but they also have one of the highest profit margins—on the order of 35 to 40 percent. In the case of Lawson, this profit is divided 40/60 between the company and franchisee respectively. A good tasting, more expensive onigiri that sold well meant more money for both the store owner and the corporation.

In November 2002, Lawson launched the new rice balls series under the nostalgic moniker Onigiri-ya. Like the onigiri varieties themselves, the project team also designed, voted on, and approved the campaign name and logo, a Japanese-style sliding door with a short blue curtain (norm) hanging just below the entrance’s frame. The onigiri wrapping, a specially engineered rice paper, added an additional layer of distinction to the product. The wrapping paper also ensured that the Onigiri-ya products stood out from other rice balls offerings on the store shelves. While the price per onigiri was close to double that of the regular variations, the Onigiri-ya product was noticeably larger in size. In addition, all onigiri in the series were made with one or more “name brand” regional food products. The base ingredient for all the rice balls was Niigata koshikari, a well-known variety of rice from a region in Japan renowned for its rice production. The onigiri fillings included braised eel from Kyushu, pickled plums from Wakayama, and fish roe from Hokkaido. The Onigiri-ya selection represented the ultimate commodity frontier. The ingredients easily called forth popular destinations of travel (see Caldwell’s chapter in this volume). For the salary men, office ladies, and retirees who bought the onigiri, their purchase became a means of traveling through taste without ever having to leave the confines of the office or park bench.

The Onigiri-ya products sold well. In the first several weeks of the product’s launch, Lawson released a TV commercial featuring Niinami himself, dressed in a dark suit and looking out over an expansive array of Onigiri-ya rice balls. The sentence Onigiri wa nihonjin no sokojitaka (“Rice balls are the Japanese people’s source of stamina”) was spliced between the shots of Niinami pondering the selection and biting into rice balls he grasped in each hand. The decision to have Niinami appear on the commercial was doubly apt. The Onigiri-ya project represented Niinami’s official debut as the new leader of Japan’s second largest convenience store company.
and the main purchasers of the Onigiri-ya product (according to POS data) tended to be white-collar company employees like himself, with more discretionary income than their younger colleagues (Murata 2003).

The Limits and Liability of Rice-Ball-Led Restructuring

Despite the success of the Onigiri-ya project as a whole, there were setbacks. On May 21, 2002, news leaked out that Lawson’s banner Niigata koshikari rice had been blended with rice from another area. Some 218 Lawson convenience stores in Miyagi and Yamagata Prefectures received onigiri made with the blended rice. The reason for the blending was never exactly clear; but some analysts suggested that the just-in-time production system was to blame. When producing more “generic” onigiri, blending rice was not an issue and thus cheaper grades of rice were acquired and mixed as needed, allowing for warehouse and storage costs to be kept to a minimum. But in turning to “prestigious” ingredients, whether koshikari rice or fish roe, the just-in-time system left food producers in a risky situation. Unexpected spikes in demand and dwindling supplies due to weather, pollution, spoilage, or poor planning meant that not enough resources would be on hand to fill orders. Substituting inferior ingredients or “blending” was one solution, but it carried with it the danger of being exposed by consumer watch groups and housewife organizations that constantly keep an eye out for dishonest and deceptive practices. Blame strikes not just at the factory level, but at the company whose image is intimately linked to the product.

Lawson’s head office reacted quickly when the rice-blending story broke. Niinami made an immediate decision not to hide the truth about the rice-mixing incident from consumers. Reversing mistakes made during the fingertip incident, Niinami ordered immediate disclosure of what had occurred. Within twenty-four hours, Lawson published official apologies in major national newspapers and on its website. A day later, Niinami met in person with the head of the factory that had produced the onigiri and made it clear that Lawson would not tolerate future missteps. Lawson’s damage control appeared to work. Onigiri-ya products remain strong sellers. However, not long after the incident, Lawson’s Onigiri-ya television ad campaign changed. Niinami’s executive visage was replaced with that of the gray-haired, kimono-clad actress Ichida Hiromi, famous for her Kyoto dialect and numerous roles as a devout wife and mother in Japanese period dramas (jidaikei). Ichida continues to be the face of the Onigiri-ya brand, inviting television viewers to enjoy the old-fashioned goodness of the latest rice ball flavor. While the onigiri contributed to a corporation’s reinvention, its public spokesperson returned to a recognizable matronly trope.

The Lawson Onigiri-ya case suggests paths for the onigiri and the limits and liabilities that accompany these trajectories. In moving outside of the home into a commercial sphere, the onigiri becomes more than a vehicle for cementing human-to-human relationships; it forges connections between individuals, stores, and corporations. But while the onigiri is offered as a kinder, gentler, more culturally recognizable fast food, it is not free from scrutiny. Problems with onigiri, whether the discovery of an unexpected gruesome ingredient or the blending of grades of rice, act as reminders to both the consumer and company of the limitations of corporate “materialism” in mass food production. Products marketed as conveniences (kёzuina mono) in modern Japan have historically been accompanied by a social questioning of quality, health, safety, and even the possible deleterious impact that these technological and commercial advancements may have on people’s lives. A matrix of organizations in Japan including active local, regional, and national consumer rights and housewife organizations, government agencies, and the media have contributed to distinctive social sensitivity toward and awareness of products. As konbini ad campaigns and company slogans push the onigiri further onto center stage, the product becomes a greater focus of attention for consumer advocacy organizations and the media as well. Newsletters, online forums, and newspaper articles are one counterbalance to intense product campaigns. By publicly examining and discussing the unhealthy dimensions of the convenience store, these sources embed the konbini onigiri in issues like the use of food additives and preservatives and the amount of waste that stores generate.

On yet another level, the ubiquity of the convenience store and the proliferation of onigiri consumption have led to cautionary tales and critical forms of moral discourse. Housewife logs from recent dietary surveys show that some mothers are now buying onigiri in konbini and supermarkets and these purchases are made to supplement family meals (Iwamura 2004). It is not uncommon to hear stories from frustrated mothers and grandmothers about children who will no longer eat their onigiri because the rice balls looked strange and tasted different than the store-bought varieties. Rather than being read as merely symptoms of the “commercialization of intimate life” (Hochschild 2003), these examples are important contributions to a collective consciousness about life in a commercial society.

Conclusion: The Category of Konbini Onigiri

The onigiri has not disappeared from people’s diets; far from it. Its simplicity, nutritional value, and cultural cachet have allowed it to maintain its popularity as a food. While still produced by hand in homes and school cafeterias, the onigiri is also embraced by commercial enterprises and offered for sale to the Japanese consumer. Reinventing the convenience of convenience food in ways that benefit the bottom line and appeal to a consumer’s changing needs, the convenience store has found a way to insert itself between reproduction of the family and the production of
the market economy (White 2002). Corporate focus on the onigiri combined with public and consumer interest, both positive and negative, has led to the emergence of the konbini onigiri as a category of its own. In the course of my field research, informants and news sources increasingly use the term konbini onigiri to identify the commercially manufactured rice ball. The konbini onigiri is associated with certain shapes, flavors, and styles of packaging as well as a range of different practices introduced by the consumer rather than the producer. In Hokkaido and Okinawa, for example, customers prefer warmed onigiri and frequently ask clerks to microwave their purchases. Customers sometimes even instruct store employees on the exact number of seconds to warm the onigiri. Konbini onigiri are also integral ingredients in yoshoku, a new word used by young people to describe the practice of eating a quick meal with one’s friends (yūjin) outside places like konbini rather than, or in addition to, consuming “dinner” at home with family. (The Japanese term for dinner is also yoshoku, however it uses a different Chinese character for the first syllable.) Yoshoku provides opportunities for young people to gossip about teachers, exchange information on part-time job opportunities, and even debate more efficient ways to open the onigiri wrappers (Utsunomiya 2004:72).

Within the convenience store, the konbini onigiri blurs the distinction between gift and commodity. Despite company instructions to throw away all expired food items, convenience store owners frequently defy corporate orders by giving unsold onigiri and other expired food items to their part-time staff. Clerks frequently mention the practice of food handouts as a critical bonus to their low-paying jobs. Said one informant, “You don’t need to eat before going to work. Particularly if you are on the morning shift.” Clerks will even go so far as to encourage friends to apply for a job at a particular konbini because of the store owner’s largess with unsold food. Even the konbini onigiri that get thrown in the trash have the potential to enter other systems of value and circulation. Well-wrapped and easily gleaned from the dumpsters behind stores, the konbini onigiri are a source of nourishment for urban homeless populations. According to one Osaka-based homeless research task force, convenience stores are ranked relatively high on the list of places to scavenge meals.

The onigiri is emblematic of the changes of comfort in “comfort food.” Blurring the distinction between commodity and comfort, the rice ball assists in transition of family from home to workplace, helps corporations to post profits, and provides a means for convenience stores to cash into local communities. The rice ball is not merely the flagship for konbini chains like 7-Eleven Japan and Lawson, it is a metonym of the convenience store more generally. The time, effort, and attention paid to the commercialization of onigiri have not, however, emptied the onigiri of its value or meaning. Rather, they have contributed new meanings and practices to this historically fast, slow food. The category of konbini onigiri reflects the power, even magic, that food in a consumer society continues to possess. Although still able to resonate with notions of the home, motherhood, and comfort, the konbini onigiri is packed with a new set of associations and uses that extend beyond the label and logo that a corporation may try to give it.

Notes

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1. A housewife-initiated NGO, self-titled the “Japanese Onigiri Peace Corps” (Nikon Onigiri-tai), provides humanitarian aid in the form of rice balls. Each year they organize onigiri relief missions to disaster and famine-struck areas around the globe.

2. Ito-Yokado founded what became 7-Eleven Japan in 1973 through a licensing agreement with the convenience store chain’s Texas-based American owner, Southland. The first 7-Eleven opened in 1974 in an industrial section of downtown Tokyo. By 1980, over one thousand 7-Eleven franchises were operating in Japan. 7-Eleven Japan purchased a controlling share of the U.S.-based 7-Eleven in 1991 when Southland filed for bankruptcy. In 2005, 7-Eleven Japan purchased the remaining shares of 7-Eleven from Southland, giving the Japanese firm complete control over 7-Eleven’s global brand image.

3. The flavor of a woman’s hands being transferred to the food she makes is a common theme in other cultural contexts as well. In reference to the magical associations that home-cooked food has, anthropologist Richard Wilk notes that in Belize people claim that each woman’s handmade tortillas possess a distinct flavor.

4. The quote appeared on a packaged plastic model of Haku’s onigiri that Hayao’s Ghibli production company used to promote the video and DVD versions of the animated film. The life-size onigiri replica is hollow and can be opened by squeezing the toy’s sides. The instructions explain that the toy rice ball is not for eating but for holding precious keepsakes. A color photograph of Hayao himself making onigiri appears on the toy’s package. The plastic onigiri, however, is manufactured in China.

5. POS registers contain two vertical columns of color-coded keys. A light blue column is for male customers, and a light pink column for female customers. Each column is divided horizontally into four age brackets: adolescent (age fifteen and under), young adult (age sixteen to twenty-nine), middle-age adult (age thirty to forty-nine), and senior (age fifty and over). Some chains, including Lawson, separate the age categories into five groups: children (age twelve and under), teenager (age thirteen to nineteen), young adult (age twenty to twenty-nine), middle-age adult (age thirty to forty-nine), and senior (age fifty and over). For each sale, the machine will not calculate change and open the cash drawer until a customer data key is pushed.
6. In a later television interview, Niinami said he insisted upon being present at many of the rice ball taste testings and offered his own input. He admitted that the Onigiri-ya campaign added about eight pounds to his 6'2" frame.

7. A former Lawson employee explained that konbini corporations are as concerned about profit as health when insisting unsold food be thrown out and not given away. If employees are not provided with "free" meals, they are more likely to purchase store food and thus contribute to store sales. The corporations also warn store owners that giving away food may contribute to "bad employee habits" such as stealing.

References

Global Tastes, Local Contexts: An Ethnographic Account of Fast Food Expansion in San Fernando City, the Philippines
TY MATEJOWSKY

Possibly the most widespread manifestation of global consumer culture is the seemingly ubiquitous fast food restaurant. Its sleek design, standardized style of service, and distinctive menu has an appeal that resonates with millions the world over. These enterprises have become powerful agents in the spread of mass consumerism and Western values (Schlosser 2001:225–54; Strolinca 2000). Their proliferation outside of North America and Europe not only transforms notions of service, taste, and lifestyle, it also informs the built character of many urban environments (Matejowsky 2002). At a more personal level, it promotes eating habits and nutritional regimes that figure prominently in the rise of medical conditions like obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease (Schlosser 2001:240–43).

Few contemporary societies remain beyond the global reach of the fast food industry. The spread of the political economy and institution of fast food occurs regardless of the specific content, nationality, or style of the food itself. The regimented service model on which fast food is based transfers easily to areas where conditions of free enterprise and neoliberalism have taken root. In many ways, it is the local variation of capitalism itself that influences the particular form and taste of fast food that is eventually offered to consumers. The myriad fast food types available worldwide reflect the diverse ways in which contemporary capitalism manifests at the local level (Blum 2000).

The fact that corporate chain restaurants have successfully made inroads in so many parts of the world (Norton 2000; Downie 2000) is one of the reasons that anthropologists and others find fast food such an intriguing research topic. The empirical literature on fast food has expanded considerably in the last twenty-five years. Since the late 1970s, when social scientists first began to recognize fast food as a legitimate area of investigation (Kottak 1978), a growing body of work on fast food and its socioeconomic implications has been compiled (Fantasia 1995; Kincheloe 2002; Krušešteva-Blažoeva 2001; Ritter 1998, 2001; Talwar 2002).