

This and that from the Food Cultures of the World

Part 9: The Station Box Lunch— The Traveler's Friend throughout Japan

Ekiben, the box lunches sold at train stations throughout Japan, are one of the delights of traveling. They have become so popular that they can even be seen at the dinner table from time to time. From the *ekiben* available at Japan Railways (JR) and private railway stations to the *soraben* available at airports, these prepared box lunches exhibit tremendous variety.

It All Began with Two Rice Balls

Department store *ekiben* fairs always attract a good number of customers. Some supermarkets and department stores regularly carry popular *ekiben*. The first *ekiben* fair at a department store was titled Famous Ekiben and Souvenirs and was held at Matsuzakaya in Ueno, Tokyo, in March 1959. As this fair was so well received, the Takashimaya department store in Osaka followed suit with the Nationwide Tourism and Delicacy Fair in 1960. Both of these events seem to have corresponded with the promotion of tourism.

The first *ekiben* was sold at Utsunomiya station on July 16, 1885. Commemorating a new line between Ueno and Utsunomiya (currently the Utsunoymiya line), the train company asked a traditional Japanese inn in Utsunomiya to provide takeout lunches to help improve passenger services. The lunch, packed in bamboo, consisted of two rice balls, each containing a pickled plum and sprinkled with sesame seeds, as well as some slices of pickled *daikon* radish. While the word *ekiben* originates from *eki*, meaning “(train) station” and *bento*, meaning “box lunch,” *ekiben* cannot be accurately defined as merely box lunches sold at train stations. Originally, they were sold only by vendors approved by the national rail service, predecessor to

today's private JR, to operate within station premises. These vendors formed an organization that survived



the privatization of the national rail service, and in 1988, they began fixing the *ekiben* logo on the packaging of prepared box lunches sold by its members, thus distinguishing the true *ekiben* from box lunches sold by non-members.

Ekiben are also sold in parts of Taiwan and Korea, but they are not nearly as popular as in Japan. Europe and the U.S. haven't adopted a similar sort of tradition as their trains are frequently equipped with dining cars.

Box Lunches Reminiscent of Edo Culture

The *ekiben* that once consisted of two rice balls and some pickles have evolved to full meals packed with local foods, whether from the sea or

mountains, that sometimes require special ordering. Some *ekiben* are self-heating, and others come with wine or the local sake, all helping to make traveling more enjoyable.

The *makuno-uchi bento*, or box lunches consisting of rice and a variety of side dishes, enjoys a deep-rooted popularity at all stations. It offers rice formed into rectangular shapes and topped with sesame seeds, side dishes such as broiled fish, Japanese-style fried egg, steamed fish paste, a deep-fried food, a boiled food, and pickles. The origin of the *makuno-uchi bento* lies in theatergoing. During the intermission between acts, or *makuno-uchi*, the well-to-do ate at the theater's tearoom. For those who could not afford the tearoom, box lunches similar to today's *makuno-uchi bento* were sold during intermission.

The *sukeroku bento* also originated with the theater. A Kabuki play titled, “Sukeroku Yukarino Edo Sakura” in which the lead character's name is Sukeroku, is the source of this type of box lunch. The *sukeroku bento* consists of *inari-zushi* (pockets of deep-fried tofu filled with sushi rice) and sushi rolls.

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Part 10: Wine Born in the Orient and Matured in Europe

When wine was born in western Asia, it was consumed as a tonic rather than for the pleasant drunkenness it induced. It was also used to keep the blood healthy, maintaining balance for a people whose diet consisted mainly of fatty mutton, and to ease the pain of illnesses with its numbing effects. Later in Persia, wine was even described as “the royal medicine.”

God’s Blessing from the Trees of Life

Grape vines existed on the Eurasian continent before humans made their appearance. The history of wine dates back to time immemorial when humans lived as gatherers. With the shift to an agricultural lifestyle, they



Tasting young wine

began domesticating grapes. Wine has played a significant role in the cultural history of humanity ever since. Our ancestors squeezed grapes for their juice and sometimes added honey. Sometimes stored in leather bags (also known as wineskins), the grape juice and honey combination would soon ferment and become wine. This natural process was humans’ first introduction to wine.

Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is believed to be the birthplace of wine. It is said that wine production began with the Sumerians, who then passed it on to the Egyptians roughly 8,000–10,000 years ago. This theory was confirmed when a wine maker’s seal (a round stone rod with a low relief of grapes) was unearthed from Mesopotamian ruins dating back 6,000 years or

more. Wine was poured into earthenware pots for storage through a small opening at the top. Once filled, the pots were sealed with wet clay pressed into the opening using the round seal. After drying, the clay acted as a cork, preventing foreign

substances from contaminating the wine. The seal used to press the clay into the pot’s opening is thought to have been the signature of the wine maker. An earthenware cask from before 2850 BC and slightly newer than relics left by the Sumerians, with the word “wine” inscribed on it, has also been

uncovered. The Sumerians and Egyptians both referred to grape vines as the “Trees of Life” and believe of that wine was a drink bestowed by the gods. From Mesopotamia and Egypt, wine was introduced to western Asia and Europe. The European wine culture that has continued to this day was developed by the Greeks and refined by the Romans.

Napoleon’s Sunset Years with White Wine

Until wine became common among the Romans, it was diluted with water. Initially, the Romans drank their wine diluted, as the Greeks did, but as their diet improved less and less water was added to the wine. In modern France, it is said that the people drink wine like water. This may be due in part to the fact that

inexpensive wine is less expensive than mineral water in that country, though some say that wine consumption in France is decreasing.

On October 15, 1815, the French emperor Napoleon I was exiled to the



Napoleon I Bonaparte; died in exile on St. Helena in 1821
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island of Saint Helena, 2,800 km off the Bight of Guinea. His primary comfort on the island was wine sent from the Constantia Valley in present-day South Africa, where quality wines were produced. The sweet Constantia white wine was much favored by European aristocrats during the 18th and 19th centuries.

On a side note, the corks for the wine that Napoleon drank were most likely made from Portuguese cork oak. Corks are a traditional product of Portugal, which receives orders from around the world. All work in the production of corks is done manually. During the 1980s worldwide wine production reached an all-time peak. However, completely dependent upon manual labor and recovering from the effects of two oil crises, cork production was unable to keep up and thus, wine production was curtailed.

The history of wine has advanced in tandem with human history. It is marked with our intelligence and even suggests the fragrance of our cultures and the stench of our politics.

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