

Sharing Travel Treats with the World

Japan's *Ekiben* Win Favor in France

Railways developed as a major means of long-distance travel in Japan from the 1880s on, and along with this came demand for food to eat during the many hours on the train. From the start, rice balls called *onigiri* were sold on station platforms, but as time went on, there gradually emerged supplies of boxed meals, *bento*, featuring local food products or evoking local attractions. These came to be called *ekiben*, *eki* meaning train station and *ben* being short for *bento*, and they won recognition as local specialties. So well established is their position on the Japanese travel scene that some people actually take trips for the express purpose of eating them. The *ekiben*, which people can buy on a station platform and then eat on the train, making good use of their time in transit, has become an element of Japan's food culture.

Now a move is underway to share the railway *bento* familiar to Japanese with travelers elsewhere. An *ekiben* kiosk has been opened for a two-month period at Gare de Lyon, one of the main railway terminals in Paris. It is the first such international initiative. As the operator of the kiosk explains, France has a culture of long-distance rail travel similar to Japan's, and recently French people have become more familiar with Japanese culture; this was the basis for the decision to undertake trial sales of *ekiben* in Paris with the objective of spreading this typically Japanese railway cuisine.

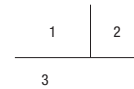
The kiosk at Gare de Lyon offers five types of boxed meals, including "Makunouchi," a popular traditional type of *bento* with many ingredients, and "Paris-Lyon," an original *bento* featuring French beef. The beautiful and easy-to-eat arrangement of the food has been impressing French travelers. The ingredients have been adjusted to enhance their appeal to France's first-time *ekiben* diners, such as by adding flavoring to the white rice. These Japanese-style boxed meals are reportedly winning favor in France as well.

In Japan, *ekiben* fairs are held periodically at department stores and elsewhere, meeting the wishes of people who want to enjoy a travel experience but who cannot readily take a trip. At these events, which have proved quite popular, people can buy boxed meals from various locations prepared on the spot as they watch. And at Matsuri, an *ekiben* shop inside Tokyo Station, people can choose from a lineup of over 170 daily-made *ekiben* from around the country. This is a boon to those who do not have time to visit the local stations where they are ordinarily sold. Matsuri is planning to hold a G7 commemorative *ekiben* fair featuring the proud offerings of the cities where G7 Summit-related meetings are being held this year.

Special fairs of this sort provide a convenient way of purchasing *ekiben*, but the best way of experiencing them is by eating them locally. We hope that when you visit Japan, you will travel to regional destinations and enjoy various box meals as you make the rounds of tourist attractions. A dazzling variety of *ekiben* await you—each one a package of local foods, local tradition, and above all, the thoughtful ingenuity of local people seeking to offer travelers delicious meals.



1. People line up to buy boxed meals at the “Ekiben” kiosk in Paris. 2. Two of the *bento* sold at Ekiben: Makunouchi (left) and Paris-Lyon, both for €15. 3. Customers can refer to the samples on display as they choose their *bento*.



Appealing *ekiben* from around Japan



Toyama
Masu no sushi (pressed trout sushi)
JPY 1,400 (USD 12.70)



Niigata
Engawa oshi-zushi
(pressed Greenland halibut sushi)
JPY 1,100 (USD 10)



Sendai
Gokusen sumibiyaki gyutan bento
(charcoal-grilled ox tongue)
JPY 1,350 (USD 12.30)



Kobe
Atचित्चि suteki bento (sizzling steak)
JPY 1,330 (USD 12.10)



Yokokawa
Toge no kamameshi (pot of rice
topped with various ingredients)
JPY 1,000 (USD 9.10)



Mito
Komon bento (multiple-ingredient
meal, named after local hero)
JPY 1,300 (USD 11.80)

Note: Prices include 8% consumption tax.