

Recitation C

King of the Convenience Store

Japan is known for its fine cuisine and Michelin-starred restaurants. For many visitors, however, fond memories are associated with more humble and accessible fare — a bowl of ramen at a dimly lit yatai food stall, colorful plates of sushi revolving around a conveyor-belt restaurant, or the cheap and easy sustenance of a convenience store breakfast.

Onigiri rice balls are perhaps the most representative of Japan's ready-made foods. They are one of the most popular snacks in the convenience store, with millions sold every day. For tourists and short-term residents, though, they may come with a helping of mystery. While the filling is sometimes indicated using English or a picture, it is also often only apparent from a Japanese description and ambiguous coloring on the packaging. For visitors, the element of chance can be part of the fun, at least at first.

The packaging for triangular onigiri includes both an outer layer and an interior plastic sheet designed to separate the nori wrapping from the rice, keeping it dry and crackling. There is a three-stage process for pulling the plastic apart to leave the rice ball swaddled neatly in green. Despite the elegant design, this can take some getting used to for the less dexterous. Many a torn-off piece of nori can go to waste before the knack is acquired.

As fast food choices go, rice balls can be fairly healthy, although some snackers may worry about their carbohydrate intake. One recent trend has seen stores selling onigiri with part of the white rice replaced by sticky barley or brown rice.

Convenience-store onigiri have come a long way in four decades. Like the stores themselves, they have become part of everyday life in Japan. Easy to buy and eat, they are also a perfect introduction to the nation's food for new visitors.

(301 words)