

CULTURAL NOTES

Convenience Stores (コンビニ) コンビニ originated in the U.S.A. about 100 years ago. In Japan the first one appeared in 1974, and there are now 56,500 コンビニ (in 2024). To achieve this phenomenal success in Japan, they had to introduce management practices from the U.S.A. while inventing their own business techniques. For example, the stores developed their own recipes for some traditional foods (おにぎり, おでん etc.) They also have refrigerated packaged meals and other food products delivered several times a day. Many コンビニ in Japan have a retail floor area of only about 100 m², limiting them to a maximum of about 3,000 types of products. Even so, a local コンビニ is generally able to sell what people need for daily living.

One important factor is the Point of Sales (POS) system. Computer networks link cash registers in stores to their respective headquarters. The cash registers have buttons to record customer gender and age group. In this way, customer data is correlated with the product and price information obtained from the bar codes of the item purchased. Customer and sales data is transmitted from each store to its headquarters, where it is stored and analysed. Because of POS, コンビニ can stock exactly what people want, which explains why sales revenues and store numbers are continuing to rise. Now Japanese style コンビニ are succeeding in other countries including Taiwan, Korea and China. おにぎり has become a popular light meal in Korea.

Convenience stores have recently been playing an important role in times of natural disasters providing toilets, drinking water, supplies and mobile phone charging services.

In recent years, convenience stores located close to home are now more commonly used by elderly people. In response to this, a trend towards healthier foods have dramatically increased. A wider variety of cooked foods and vegetables are also sold in smaller portions at a low price, which are valued not only by the elderly but also by people living alone, by working parent/s and by late night workers.

Services available

- A popular facility offered at コンビニ is a bill payment service.
- ATMs and a toilet are also available.
- Concert tickets or travel tickets can be purchased.
- You can print out digital pictures using the multifunction copying machine.
- At many stores, it is possible to drop off or pick up deliveries (たくはいびん), such as parcels or luggage.
- A range of postal / delivery services are available.
- Meal deliveries are also possible, and about 300 different types of meals can be delivered to your home or office.
- When you buy おべんとう or おにぎり, you can use the complimentary microwave to heat it up. If you want to eat カップラーメン just after you buy it, boiling hot water is also available.

Popular Items for Sale

あめ

These are lollies which are often wrapped individually and sold in a bag. The most popular あめ come in fruit or soft drink flavours.

あんパン

あん is sweet bean jam. Sweet beans are strained or mashed bean paste boiled with sugar. あん is most commonly made from red beans (あずき), but it is sometimes made from white or mottled kidney beans. It is the most widely used ingredient in Japanese sweets. あんパン is a bread filled with あん.

おかし(お菓子)

おかし usually refers to sweets, cakes and chocolates, but it also includes savoury food such as potato chips and せんべい (Japanese rice crackers). おかし can also be referred to as おやつ which actually means afternoon tea.

おちゃ(お茶)

There are various kinds of tea drinks sold in Japan such as green tea, oolong tea, herbal tea and black tea. Usually, it is sold in a can or a plastic bottle. おちゃ (green tea) is more popular than water. In コンビニ, when people buy Japanese foods like おべんとう or おにぎり, they often buy a tea drink. You can have hot tea or cold tea, and most people prefer cold tea to the hot variety.

おでん

おでん is a type of simmered one pot dish and usually served with hot mustard as a condiment. A variety of foods, such as, Japanese radish, hard-boiled eggs, konjac jelly (*konnyaku*), rolls of kelp, many kinds of fish-paste cake, etc. are boiled together in a large pot with seasoned fish broth. In コンビニ, there is a big pot of おでん near the cash register from which you can choose the ingredients you like and take the broth away. おでん is a very cheap meal, and is very popular in winter.

おにぎり

おにぎり is a rice ball. It is either round or triangular in shape, and is often covered with a sheet of のり (dried seaweed). It comes with a variety of fillings such as pickled plum, salty salmon, seasoned kelp, or codfish roe. There are about 18 kinds of おにぎり sold in コンビニ.

おべんとう(お弁当)

A Japanese lunchbox usually contains rice, a sour plum and vegetables boiled in soy sauce. The main meal is often fish, otherwise chicken, pork or steak. The kind of おべんとう sold depends on the season. A microwave is always available to the customer to heat up their おべんとう.

カップラーメン (Instant Noodles)

A wide variety of instant noodles are sold in コンビニ. They are cooked by pouring hot water into the large polystyrene cup in which they are sold. You can also buy instant pasta, うどん and そば. There is a hot water dispenser with boiling water near the cash register for customers to cook their noodles.

コーヒー (Coffee)

Canned and bottled coffee is very popular in Japan, and almost every vending machine stocks it. There are many kinds of coffee, which businesspeople commonly drink in the morning. Cold coffee is also available.

サラダ (Salad)

In コンビニ, salads are sold in small plastic containers. There are many varieties of salads. There is the basic salad with lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, corn and tuna, or salad with seaweed. Other choices are macaroni salad and burdock salad, and the dressing is usually mayonnaise. Because salads are healthy, they are very popular with women. Japanese people often have salads with breakfast.

サンドイッチ(Sandwich)

Sandwiches are similar to their Western equivalent, but in Japan they are usually made of white bread and the crusts are cut off.

しょうゆ

Soy sauce is the most commonly used seasoning in Japan. It is made by fermenting beans.

せんべい

せんべい is Japanese crackers and usually made from rice. The crackers are seasoned with salt or soy sauce and dried by baking them again. Some are wrapped in seaweed. The size and shape of せんべい vary greatly from locality to locality.

そば(蕎麦)

そば are long thin brownish noodles made from buckwheat flour. They are eaten either hot in soup (かけそば) or as a cold dish with a dip (ざるそば or もりそば). Minced green onions and other spices are used as condiments. In コンビニ, かけそば are sold like instant noodles, and ざるそば or もりそば are sold fresh with cold dipping sauce and condiments on the side.

だんご(団子)

Made of dough consisting mainly of rice flour, だんご is kneaded and shaped into small balls which are steamed or boiled. The balls are given a variety of coatings, such as sweet bean paste (あん) or soybean flour (きなこ), or they are dipped in soy sauce and grilled, often on bamboo skewers.

にくまん(肉まん)

This is a round bun, consisting of flour based pastry usually with pork mince inside. にくまん are always sold hot, and stored in ovens to keep them warm. They are relatively cheap, and they come with a variety of fillings including pizza, curry and あん.

まんが(漫画)

まんが (comics) are very widely read by both young people and adults. Some まんが sell several million copies every week (Demon Slayer, Jujutsu Kaisen, One Piece etc.) Popular まんが are turned into books after first being serialized in weekly magazines. In コンビニ, shop owners allow browsing because they want to create the impression of a busy and bustling convenience store. They also consider having many customers a form of theft prevention.

マニキュア (Nail Polish)

Although this word comes from the English word 'manicure', in Japanese it actually refers to nail polish.

みそ(味噌)

みそ is made by crushing boiled soybeans and adding salt and malted rice (which acts as a yeast). みそ is a vital ingredient of みそしる, which is a traditional Japanese soup.

やきとり(焼鳥)

やきとり consists of pieces of chicken, grilled on bamboo skewers over charcoal. It is flavoured during cooking with either a sour-sweet soy-based sauce or with salt.