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STARS AND STRIPES
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Stars and Stripes is asking readers to write about their own piece of paradise. Yes, that means you! Our annual Destination Paradise magazine highlights must-see travel spots across the Pacific – and your bit of paradise could be included in our 2025-26 edition that hits the streets on Pacific bases in September. Submit your story and photos to paradise@stripes.com by **July 15**. We'll make you famous! Check out our previous Destination Paradise magazines

DISCOVER SHIROKANEDAI

High-end Tokyo area features beautiful museum, chic cafés, restaurants and a forest

Pages 4-5



INSIDE INFO



**SLURP ON OVER TO
TASTY, CHEAP SOBA
JOINT NEAR CAMP ZAMA**
 PAGE 3

**Special 8-page
pullout inside!**

Yokota school unearths Pokemon, Teletubby, other millennial memories from time capsules

BY SETH ROBSON,
 STARS AND STRIPES
 Published: May 2, 2025

YOKOTA AIR BASE — A brick-sized cell-phone, a Pokemon card and a purple Teletubbies toy were among the items pulled from a pair of time capsules buried a quarter-century ago in a schoolyard at this airlift hub in western Tokyo.

Three former pupils returned to Joan K. Mendel Elementary on Friday to help hundreds of current students and faculty crack open the capsules in the school's assembly hall.

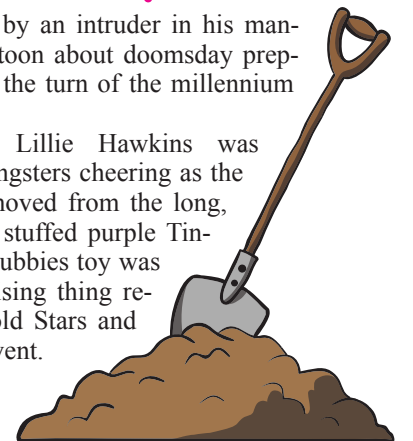
Items recovered included a Nokia cell-phone with a retractable antenna; a Michael Jordan basketball card; memorabilia from Pokemon, "The Lion King" and Teletubbies; LEGO and other building blocks; a Snoopy figurine; a Beanie Babies elephant; a yoyo; a computer disk; and a collection of kindergarteners' handprints.

There was also a first edition of Stars and Stripes for the new millennium, dated Jan. 1, 2000. It included a lead story about ID checks at the Yokota commissary, which was also the subject of a letter to the editor. The 40-page newspaper also featured an article about former Beatle George Harrison

being attacked by an intruder in his mansion, and a cartoon about doomsday preppers riding out the turn of the millennium in a bunker.

Fifth-grader Lillie Hawkins was among the youngsters cheering as the items were removed from the long, metal tubes. A stuffed purple Tinky Winky Teletubbies toy was the most surprising thing recovered, she told Stars and Stripes at the event.

**SEE CAPSULES
ON PAGE 2**



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This photo of Joan K. Mendel Elementary's 1999-2000 faculty and staff was among the time capsule items revealed at the school. It was known as Yokota East Elementary then. Photos by Joshua L. DeMotts, Stars and Stripes



A student and faculty members show items that will be added to the next time capsule to be buried on the grounds of Joan K. Mendel Elementary.

CAPSULES: A look at the past

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"I hate the Teletubbies — they are creepy and scary," she said. "I didn't know they were popular 25 years ago."

The Beanie Babies elephant interested fourth-grader Caroline Martin, who has "too many to count" of the pellet-filled plushies.

Martin brought a recorder to the event, noting that she can play the song "Hot Cross Buns" on it. The instrument is one of several items — including a recent copy of Stars and Stripes — that students plan to place inside another time capsule to be buried for another quarter-century.

Melissa Yu was among the former students who returned to help reveal the treasures.

"I don't remember what's in this capsule other than Pokemon cards and a cellphone," she told the kids ahead of the unveiling.

In the years since she left Yokota, Yu served briefly in the Air Force and traveled to all seven continents. She works as a talent agent in Atlanta and is going back to law school on the GI bill, she told the children.

Yokota's acting deputy commander, Lt. Col. Stephen Pituch, told the students he was a senior airman fixing aircraft when the capsules were buried. Back then people used paper maps instead of satellite navigation to find their way around, he said.

"There were no iPhones ... there was no Facebook ... no YouTube," he added. "How

would you live? It was so hard."

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which happened about a year after the capsules were buried, changed "how we act and how we respond to things," Pituch told the children.

Another former student, Michael Visnyei, didn't have to travel far for the event. He works at Yokota's Kanto Lodge.

Another former student, Nashville pizza shop owner Andrew King, said he'd been planning to see the capsules opened since they were buried on May 2, 2000.

The trip to Yokota was a chance to show his wife, Jessica, who came with him, one of the places where he grew up as the son of a soldier, he added.

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@SethRobson1

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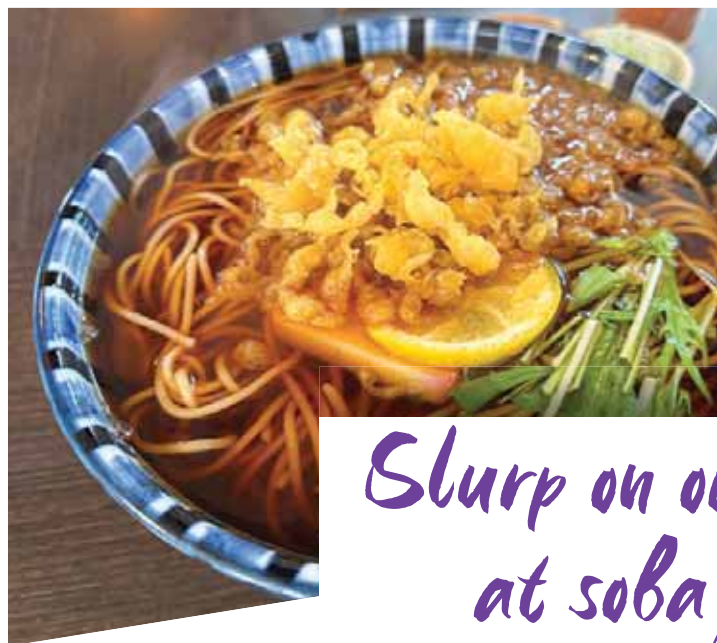
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Slurp on over for a cheap, tasty lunch at soba joint near Camp Zama

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPE JAPAN

Though you may only know Zama City as the home of the U.S. Army Garrison Japan at Camp Zama, it is also a place to enjoy some good food and beautiful natural elements.

Before World War II, prior to its existence as Camp Zama, the installation was the headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Army Academy. Today, the area surrounding the camp is well-known for its various parks, shrines and museums, perfect for spending quality time in nature. Visits to the Zama Yatoyama Park, Zama Shrine and Fujisawa Park are a must when you're in the area. And don't forget the stunning sunflower fields near the Sagami River in the late summer.

Near JR Sobudaishita Station, I took a break from my Zama exploration to enjoy a hearty bowl of soba buckwheat noodles at Kayano.

Look for the grape-themed noren curtains

at the entrance of this quaint and cozy noodle joint. Inside, the dining area accommodates about 20 guests. The dozens of shochu bottles on display and karaoke setup are a reminder that at night, Kayano is also a party spot for the evening izakaya pub crowd.

During my lunch visit, Kayano's atmosphere was a little more subdued. I sat at the counter and ordered a bowl of tanuki (raccoon) soba topped with bits of fried tempura batter for 570 yen (about \$4). To my surprise and delight, I was served small bowls of tuna sashimi and rice, cut persimmon and pickles to go along with my forthcoming soba meal. The sashimi bowl is relatively small, but I saw it as a decent lunch for a small eater.

Worried that this was an error, I spoke up to the chef over the counter to let her know I ordered soba, not sashimi.

"No, it's a complementary side dish that goes with any noodles during lunch time," the chef replied with a chuckle.

With the go-ahead, I proceeded to dig

right in while I waited for my noodles to arrive. The side dishes were tasty, the tuna was fresh and tender, and the persimmon portions were crisp with the perfect sweetness for the season.

Five minutes later, a large bowl of soba was placed before me, a generous portion of noodles, broth, vegetables and fried tempura batter threatened to overflow at any moment.

Carefully, I picked up some of the thin noodles dripping with the umami-packed kelp-based broth and slurped them up. The sweet flavors burst into my mouth the more I chewed on the springy noodles. For high-quality soba like this, tasty spring water is required in the noodle-making process. Zama happens to be blessed with 15 springs which, according to city officials, provide 85% of the local water supply.

I devoured my lunch. I could not believe a meal so large and delicious could still be only 570 yen. Kayano is a great lunch option that won't empty your wallet.

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com



Things to know

LOCATION: 1957-9 Shindo, Minami-ku, Sagami-hara City, Kanagawa Prefecture

HOURS: Mon., Tue., Wed., Fri., Noon – 2 p.m., 5 p.m. – midnight, Sat. and Sun., 5 p.m. – midnight (closed Thursdays)

TEL: 046-252-7704



WEBSITE

Walk off a hearty steak dinner in Tokyo's Daimon District

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STARS AND STRIPES

For a taste of old and new Tokyo, head to Daimon, also known as Hamamatsucho, a busy business district near Tokyo Tower.

There nestled among the modern skyscrapers and old shotengai shopping street, you'll find Yappari Steak, serving up tender beef Japanese style.

When I pushed through the colorful façade of the steakhouse on my walk around the district, the restaurant's ample seating and cozy interior greeted me. I was seated at the counter where a tablet was waiting for my order.

Yappari's menu features steak sets which include rice, egg drop soup, salad and curry sauce. The meals also include unlimited rice, soup and salad refills.

I settled on the 200-gram beef steak lunch set for 1,980 yen (about \$13).

In less than five minutes, my sizzling steak and side dishes arrived. The rare steak was served on a sizzling lava stone plate which cooked the steak to the level I wanted. The infrared effect of the lava



stone also ensured the meat stayed tender and juicy.

Each bite of perfectly cooked, sweet and tangy steak delighted my taste buds. I enjoyed sampling all the seasonings the restaurant provides at the table to ensure every customer gets a steak to their taste. It was fun looking for the right

combination of seasonings that would elevate the exceptional steak. First, I tried salt and pepper only, then moved onto onion sauce, which was sweet and refreshing. Finally, I ended up with the standard soy sauce and wasabi dipping combinations, which for me was the best. No need to fix what isn't broken!

Things to know

LOCATION: 2-1-18 Shibadaimon, Minato-ku, Tokyo
HOURS: 11 a.m. – 11 p.m.
TEL: 03-6432-0029



WEBSITE

Since opening in Okinawa in 2015, Yappari Steak has expanded to over 80 chain restaurants around Japan. Check their site and grab a nice steak dinner at a reasonable price near you! I was very happy I chose Yappari before I continued my long exploration of Daimon.

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com

Photo by yu_photo, stock.adobe.com

Visit Tokyo museum once home to a

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPES JAPAN

A seven-minute walk from JR Meguro Station, Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum is a unique and sophisticated museum with traditional Japanese and typical Western-style gardens.

The three-story plaster-built museum has a relatively simple yet modern appearance. Its flat roof and tall rows of sheet glass windows are clean and impressive against the backdrop of beautiful green gardens.

The museum was built in 1933, as the residence of Prince Asakanomiya, by applying French Art Deco design style using patterns with straight lines, along with three-dimensional forms of various geometrical structures.

The glass entrance featuring a standing female figure was impressive and made me excited to go in the unusual and artistic space that was in front of me.

Walking in the museum made me feel as if I had strayed into the good old days of the 1930s.

Despite the building being the Art Deco style, I found it interesting that the first and second floors had different looks and atmospheres.

The first floor served as a space for welcoming visitors with a great hall, drawing room

and dining hall. It was designed as Henri Rapin and René Lalique

Art Deco style. The second floor, Prince's family, was mostly Ministry's Construction Bureau. Japanese flavor to the impression.

It is also interesting that the room has a unique shaped lamp.

The museum is currently to Modern – Graphic Design graphic design works created – 1980s, including Kiel West and Lufthansa Brochure by ing Department.

takiguchi.takahiro@stripes.com

Top-notch tonkatsu a perfect meal

Only a 15-minute walk from the museum and park, you'll find a top-notch tonkatsu restaurant.

Taiho specializes in tonkatsu - the Japanese specialty of breaded pork cutlet dishes.

Among the countless tonkatsu restaurants across the nation, Taiho is known for offering authentic taste at reasonable prices.

The popular restaurant attracts people from all over Tokyo, including some famous names in TV. And, because of the popularity, you may encounter a wait if you visit the location. But, believe me, the long waiting time will surely be worth it if you are a fan of one of Japan's most popular dishes.

My wife and I had to wait in line for about 30 minutes before getting a table. When we went into the shop, the interior was cozy, but tiny - a counter and tables for about 15 people.

Sitting in the middle of counter, we watched as two young chefs in traditional white attire skillfully fried up tonkatsu dishes.

I ordered (\$11), which is the same price.

According to breadcrumbs made watching our white en brown.

The cutlet was With one bite, the wrapped in golden


The cutlets curly parsley and ly sweet and crisp bles harvested in is known for its h


You can choose sauce, as well as recommend the meat that's rich in

The set also co




とんかつ 大 宝





Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum
HOURS: Tue – Sun, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. (closed Mondays)
LOCATION: 5-21-9 Shirokanedai, Minato-ku, Tokyo
ADMISSION: Varies
URL: www.teien-art-museum.ne.jp
TEL: 03-5777-8600



WEBSITE

useum prince

l by renowned French designers, such
ue, and showcases authentic French
oor, used as the private quarters of the
designed by the Imperial Household
ureau which applied some traditional
essive art style.
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Shirokanedai's forest in the heart of Tokyo

Shirokanedai, where the museum is located, is known as a decent residential district with high-end shops and chic cafes. But, most uniquely, the district is also home to a large untouched forest in the center of Tokyo.
Feudal lords owned the area throughout Edo Period (1603-1867) before it became military property and then an imperial estate.
With the end of World War II, the area became a national natural-education park for the public. Today, the National Museum runs the park as “The Institute for Nature Study”.
While walking along the forest path, you’ll find various deciduous trees and conifers, along with a botanical garden, marsh, pond and ruins of an ancient villa.
The park is a must-see attraction in the district, as it gives you a chance to check out how Tokyo looked like in old days.

Institute for Nature Study
LOCATION: 5-21-5 Shirokanedai, Minato-ku, Tokyo
(7-minute walk from JR Meguro Station)
HOURS: Sept. – Apr, 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.,
May – Aug., 9 a.m. 5 p.m.
ADMISSION: 320 yen (adult),
Free (17 and below or 65 and over)
URL: www.ins.kahaku.go.jp/
TEL: 03-3441-7176



WEBSITE



and a roosu katsu (pork loin cutlet) set for 1,500 yen
le my wife had a hire katsu (pork filet cutlet) set for
a chef, their cutlets are breaded with natural yeast
de from their own homemade bread. We enjoyed
te breaded cutlets gradually changed color to a gold-
crispy and tender enough to cut with our chopsticks.
e flavor and juices burst from the pearly pink meat
en breadcrumbs.
ome on the plate with shredded cabbage, a sprig of
bright wedge of lemon. The cabbage was surprising-
py. According to the chef, they use the leafy vegeta-
the Miura Peninsula in Kanagawa Prefecture, which
high quality of fruits and vegetables.
se between soy sauce, two types of Worcestershire
rock salt to dip your meat in. Among the options, I
rock salt first, as it goes well with the savory, juicy
n flavor
omes with rice, miso soup, salad and pickles.

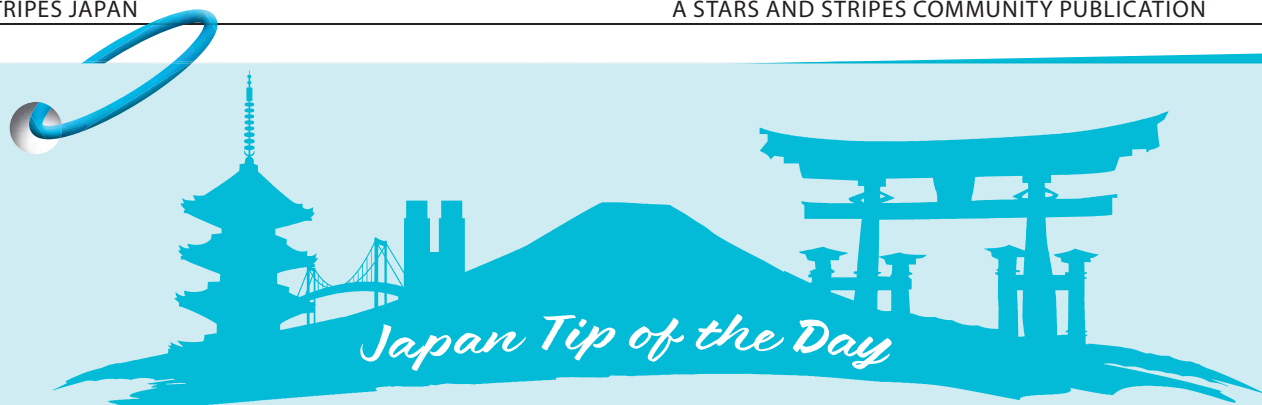


Tonkatsu Taiho
HOURS: 11:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. and 5:30 – 10 p.m.
LOCATION: 1-6-15 Meguro, Meguro-ku, Tokyo
(5-minute walk from JR Meguro Station)
URL: www.tonkatsu-taihou.jp/
TEL: 03-3491-9470



WEBSITE





Japan Tip of the Day

7-Eleven Japan smoothies a great way to eat, drink your fruits, veggies

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LUIS SAMAYOA,
STRIPES JAPAN

Did you know most 7-Eleven stores in Japan offer blended fruit and latte smoothies?

These are lifesavers when you're craving something a little healthier and don't feel like hunting for a nearby smoothie shop.

Compared to the U.S. stores, 7-Eleven convenience stores in Japan offer so much more specifically to make life... well, more convenient! In addition to bill payment and shipping services, you can also get concert and theme park tickets or make photocopies and postcards, too. The stores also have a variety of prepared foods and an amazing drink selection. Best of all, enjoying a meal at 7-Eleven won't upset your stomach or your wallet!

The 7-Eleven smoothies are a great way to get some fruits, vegetables (depending on the flavor) and vitamins in a pinch.

How to get a smoothie:

Depending on the 7-Eleven you visit, you'll find clear cups in the freezer section filled with frozen smoothie ingredients. Check the label to see what flavors are in stock.

So far, I've tried some of the flavors like acai, blueberry and strawberry.

They also have other flavors like sweet potato or green juice. Soon, the chain convenience stores will release a café latte flavor. Pick your favorite then head to the register to pay. Each smoothie costs around 350 yen (about \$1.75)

Next, go to the smoothie blenders usually near the entrance. Scan the barcode on the lid of the cup. This will unlock the door of the machine. Peel off the lid and place the cup with the ingredients inside and close the door.

Once you push the start button, it takes about a minute or two for the machine to blend up a fresh smoothie. There are lids and straws at the station, so don't forget those when the machine releases your cup.

You'll love the fresh smoothies so much, you'll probably want to try as many as I have. Check them out next time you visit the conbinni!

samayoa.luis@stripes.com



Recycling PET bottles at grocery stores

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LUIS SAMAYOA,
STRIPES JAPAN

Since my move to Japan, I have found many things to love, but also a few things that stress me out. One of those is off-base recycling.

If you live off base, you may be familiar with the trash and recycling pick up schedule, so you know when and where they pick up certain items. Where I live, PET bottles, which are what most drinks and waters are packaged in, are picked up once every two weeks and require special bags only available for purchase at conbinnis or grocery stores in the same city.

The strict requirements mean PET bottles pile up and can quickly overtake my home if I'm not prepared or I forget to put them out before pick-up day.

Believe me, bottle-filled bags can quickly become a nightmare. Fortunately, there's a nice way to avoid this problem!

In Japan, many large supermarkets offer recycling services for cardboard, PET bottles and even old clothes. If you're like me, buried under PET bottles, you might want to check to see if your neighborhood grocer provides this convenient service.



Near Yokota Air Base, where I'm stationed, super-store Joyful Honda offers a free ECO card, which allows customers access to recycling aluminum cans and PET bottles.

How to recycle at Joyful Honda:

First, scan your ECO card. Then you can begin the drop off.

For PET bottles, make sure the caps and labels are removed. There is a small cap disposal there, too.

Place label-less and capless bottles one at a time onto the conveyor belt. Aluminum cans are collected next to the PET bottle machine. Before you start inserting cans, make sure to scan the ECO card.

The card at Joyful Honda gives customers points for recycling. Each item earns .02 points. Obtain 500 points and receive a 500-yen (about \$3.36) off coupon for use inside the store.

Though it may take a while to collect the required 500 points, the cost savings from not waiting every two weeks for collection and not having to buy special city bags for PET bottles is priceless.

Check your nearby grocery store to see if they offer their own recycling benefit program.

samayoa.luis@stripes.com

More on trash and recycling



READ THE STORY

CAP COLLECTION BOX



Things to know

JOYFUL HONDA
(NEAR YOKOTA AIR BASE)
ADDRESS: 442 Tonogaya, Mizuho,
Nishitama District, Tokyo
190-1212



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Stripes Sports Trivia

Three years before winning its first Super Bowl, which team lost the inaugural “Big Game”?

Answer
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Bon Odori summer festivals are usually held at shrines, temples and public squares as they are considered important events bringing communities together. Today's Bon Odori only last a few hours, but when they first started hundreds of years ago, they were overnight events held to entertain ancestors' souls which were believed to be staying with their family for Bon period.

Kanji of the week

車
Kuruma [Car]

Language Lesson

Excuse me.

Sumimasen.

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The Weekly Crossword by Margie E. Burke

ACROSS

1 Wilson or Moreno
5 Flat floater
9 Nether world
14 Sign of trouble
15 ___ Minor
16 Alpha's opposite
17 Deep thinkers
19 From around here
20 Home for many hippies
21 Assassinated SF mayor
23 Information analyzer
25 Upturned mug?
28 Beginning from
29 TV spots
32 Whetstone's purpose
34 Water pill
36 Right-hand man
37 Speeder's bane
39 "___ Las Vegas"
40 Brody's "King Kong" role
42 Trade ship of old
44 Triumphant cry
45 Game-box insert
47 Fine-grained abrasive
48 Narrow escape
51 Bookstore shopper
53 Evens the score
57 Prophetic signs
58 Walter's running mate in 1984
60 Feudal superior
61 Wrinkle remover
62 One of the Great Lakes
63 Mink's cousin
64 Pessimist's word
65 Lays down the lawn

DOWN

1 Campus military org.
2 "If you ask me," online
3 Abound
4 Odd occurrences
5 Claude of old movies
6 Ledger column
7 Tailor's concern
8 Island state of Australia
9 Piece keeper?
10 Fuel brand with a torch logo
11 Ornamental
12 "The Candy House" novelist Jennifer
13 Store sign
18 Blades of song and film
22 Happens
24 Funny little teasers
25 Less than legit
26 Watered silk
27 Cary Grant film with Ingrid Bergman

Answers to Previous Crossword:

B	E	T	A	A	R	I	D	O	M	E	G	A
O	L	I	N	S	A	N	E	R	A	D	I	X
A	I	M	S	I	N	D	E	C	I	S	I	V
S	T	E	E	R	A	G	E	H	O	S	T	E
T	E	S	L	A	E	N	G	I	N	E		
O	S	G	O	O	D	S	I	D	E	R	E	A
K	I	N		N	O	T	N	I	L	C	I	A
A	L	A	C	A	R	T	E	S	A	V	O	R
Y	O	L	O									
K	A	N	S	A	S	A	N	G	E	L	I	N
O	C	E	A	N	S	P	R	A	Y	A	L	E
C	L	O	C	K	A	G	A	R	T	E	A	S
H	U	N	K	S	R	E	N	O	E	D	D	Y

SUDOKU
Difficulty: Medium

Edited by Margie E. Burke

HOW TO SOLVE:
Each row must contain the numbers 1 to 9; each column must contain the numbers 1 to 9; and each set of 3 by 3 boxes must contain the numbers 1 to 9.

Answer to Previous Sudoku:

5	8	6	9	7	1	3	4	2
4	7	3	2	8	5	6	1	9
2	1	9	3	4	6	5	8	7
7	2	5	1	3	4	9	6	8
9	4	8	5	6	2	7	3	1
3	6	1	7	9	8	4	2	5
6	9	2	8	5	3	1	7	4
8	3	7	4	1	9	2	5	6
1	5	4	6	2	7	8	9	3

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The background is a rich, textured collage of Japanese culinary elements. It features a wooden surface with various items: green onions, a small teapot, cups of tea, a bowl of white rice with chopsticks, a plate of salmon, a bowl of sushi, a plate of crab, and a bowl of mushrooms. The overall theme is Japanese cuisine.

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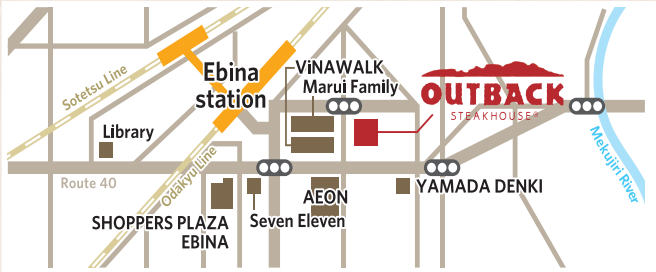


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SPICE UP DINNERTIME WITH OKINAWA TACO RICE RECIPE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

If you ask me, taco rice is the kind of food that is hard not to like. Since it was invented in 1984 by Matsuo Gibo, who owned fast-food joint Parlor Senri near Camp Hansen, taco rice has grown to be one of the most beloved tastes of Okinawa.

The genius of making tacos heartier by replacing taco shells with rice has become a hit not only among locals, but also tourists.

While I would like taco rice for a quick and light lunch, I did not think of it as a treat. Fried ground meat, onion, tomato, lettuce, and cheese served on rice didn't seem quite special to me. However, a recipe changed my opinion.

Recently, I tried making a taco rice recipe I found on Orion Beer's website. The local beer company described the recipe as a "spicy taco rice for adults," and the photo on the website showed a delicious plate served with a glass of beer on the side.

Luckily, this recipe was straightforward and easy to follow. But there was one key lesson for me: Chili powder can make a huge difference. No sooner had I begun mixing fried meat with the red condiment than my mouth watered. As the fried meat was served on rice along with tomato, cheese, lettuce, and lemon, I knew already that I was going to love it.

The taco rice tasted as spicy as advertised. So, I washed it down with a glass of non-alcoholic beer since I still had work to do. However, with this "adult" taco rice, alcohol was not needed to compliment an already delicious, satisfying meal.

kudaka.shoji@stripes.com

SPICY TACO RICE

(Based on a recipe by Orion Beer)

INGREDIENTS

- Ingredients (for two persons)
- Ground beef and pork (150g)
- Onion (half a ball)
- Garlic (half a clove)
- Chili powder (15 cc or less)
- Black pepper (as much as you wish)
- Olive oil (7.5 cc)
- Ketchup (30 cc)
- Medium thick sauce or Tonkatsu sauce (7.5 cc)
- Salt (two fingertip pinches)
- Cherry tomatoes (6 to 7, to be sliced in half or in four pieces)
- Any cheese you prefer (50 g)
- Lettuce (2 to 3 leaves, to be cut into fine strips)
- Rice (for 2 persons)

*For the topping, add sliced lemon, avocado, and spicy sauce depending upon your liking.

★★ Make sure to dry off your lettuce with a paper towel first. Fry onions, ground beef and pork until they are cooked down and low on moisture, as this will give you a concentrated and crisp flavor.

DIRECTIONS

1 Fry chopped onion with olive oil in a pan. Once the onion becomes soft, add garlic, ground beef, and pork before further frying the mixture.



3 Add ketchup, medium thick sauce (tonkatsu sauce), and salt before frying the mixture until it becomes dry. Finish it up by adding black pepper.

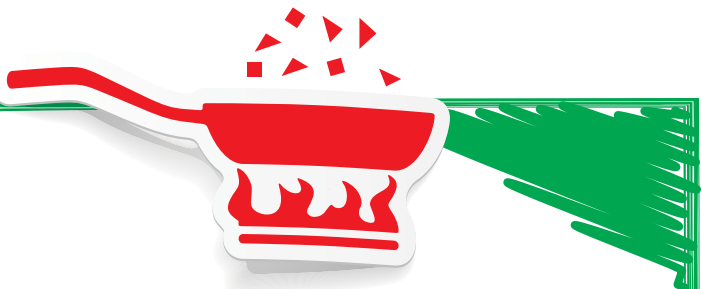


2 When the ground beef and pork are cooked enough, add chili powder to add aroma.



4 Serve up rice and a plate and top it with the fried mixture and other toppings such as sliced cherry tomatoes, cheese, and lettuce.

5 Meshiagare (Bon appetit)!



All about Tonkatsu

the Japanese crispy pork cutlet

What is tonkatsu?

Tonkatsu is best explained etymologically. That's to say, looking at the word itself since it is basically just a description. Like calling ketchup tomato paste, for example. The "ton" in tonkatsu is simply a reading for the kanji 豚, meaning pork. The katsu part is a little more complicated and gets really complicated later, but stay with me.

To katakana-ize the English word "cutlet," we get カツレツ "katsuretsu". Pull out the first part, 'katsu', and top it off with the pork 'ton', and you get 'tonkatsu'.

From here, you can probably figure out that tonkatsu is a pork cutlet.

Specifically, it's a pork cutlet that has been rolled in breadcrumbs and egg and double-fried for that extra-crispy, like-no-other texture. Abroad, the dish has taken on many forms and is occasionally double-named pork tonkatsu, but technically tonkatsu only refers to katsu-style fried pork to begin with.

You might be a little surprised to learn that the katsu part of tonkatsu comes from English, but its culinary origins are even more interesting than that!



File photo

The history of Tonkatsu

The first iteration of tonkatsu was served in Tokyo's glamorous Ginza district in the 1890s under the simple moniker "pork cutlet." According to the Nihombashi Restaurant Association (whose authority, I believe, personally.) this took the form of a thin slice of pork served aside raw cabbage due to a lack of personnel and funds. It wasn't until 1929 that today's melt-in-your-mouth juicy, thick tonkatsu was born in a competitor's kitchen in Chiyoda, a few train stops away.

Clearly, tonkatsu came out of Japan, which doesn't explain the foreign name. In fact, plenty of Japanese apparently even debate the classification of tonkatsu as yoshoku (western-inspired Japanese food), because it is so entrenched in the country's food culture. Thankfully, there's an explanation for this as well.

About a quarter century before the first tonkatsu ever graced a heap o' cabbage, the Meiji restoration established policies to popularize Western culture. Along with this came cuisine, such as the French cotelette de veau. Without Europe's long history of incorporating rich animal products in their diet, the buttery, pan-fried veal of this French dish proved not only expensive but unsuited to Japanese tastes. Fortunately, the Japanese had developed the deep-frying technique of tempura, which wicks off excess oil on the second dip. In this way, Tonkatsu uses the original flour-egg-breadcrumb breading technique of French cuisine but Japanese frying methods to achieve its unique texture. Sounds perfect for something that came out of Ginza, right? Add to that readily available cabbage, a characteristic tonkatsu sauce with its own history, and you get the beloved tonkatsu of our time.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SYDNEY SEEKFORD,
BYFOOD

Most people would agree that if you haven't tried tonkatsu, you're missing a big part of Japanese food. It can be found on just about every menu at home and abroad, alongside staples like ramen (hint hint). But just what is tonkatsu? Where did it come from? And more importantly, have you ever ordered it, expecting to get a crunchy, juicy plate of fried meat and been met with a table of soup instead!?

Keep reading. All secrets will be revealed.

Tonkatsu vs. tonkotsu

At the start of this article, I asked if you have ever been unfortunate enough to witness this scene: Eagerly, you eye waitstaff coming around the corner, tonkatsu hopefully in tow. Then, in horror and surprise, that same waitstaff places before you or your dining companion a steaming bowl of soup instead of the requested hunk of meat.

The graphic scene I paint here is one that can only be born of experience. And shame.

On my first trip to Tokyo, I had the misfortune of ordering tonkotsu instead of my desired 'tonkatsu' thanks to a little language slip. Briefly, let's return to that etymology issue to explain.

We know that ton is pork. So obviously, I had ordered pork something. The kicker is that kotsu-katsu delineation. With a single letter, the whole menu changes.

Katsu, as we have learned, comes from cutlet.

Kotsu on the other hand comes from Japanese originally, and means bone. What I had requested (and you may have too, had I not saved you from this) was 'pork bone', which naturally conveys a desire for pork bone soup, a common base for ramen and readily available at most Japanese restaurants alongside its fried, hammy companion.

In brief, tonkatsu is a fried pork cutlet dish. Tonkotsu is the name for the rich pork-bone broth used in ramen. Sound similar, very different. Should one order tonkatsu ramen outside of Japan, however, you will probably get tonkotsu soup and not noodles topped with pork cutlet, though that would probably be great.

Tonkotsu!



File photo

Variations of 'ton'katsu

Aside from the original tonkatsu combination of pork cutlet, cabbage, and sauce on a plate, other delicious takes on tonkatsu have been born of novelty and necessity.

Katsudon

Katsudon is a tonkatsu recipe that swaps out the crunch of cabbage and zing of vinegary katsu sauce for an easy-to-eat meal even young children feel at home with. Fried pork cutlet gets simmered with sweetened egg, onion, and sauce, then served over rice. It's a one-bowl meal popular across the world and brings together some of Japan's best cooking techniques.



File photo

Katsu Curry

Apparently, the product of a customer's whims, katsu curry is now a staple in katsu and curry restaurants alike. Slightly spicy, thick Japanese curry meets the crunchy savoriness of tonkatsu in a perfect harmony of texture and flavors.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

Katsu Sando

Some genius came up with the perfect way to enjoy the classic katsu combination of katsu sauce, shredded cabbage and pork cutlet on the go. Pillowy shoku-pan style Japanese white bread soaks up the sauce to prevent drips and softens the prickly crunch of katsu panko. Served hot or cold, katsu sando are a delicious, discrete riff on tonkatsu.



File photo



File photo

Types of ‘but it’s not really ton’ katsu

Now that tonkatsu has become an international catchall word for katsu-style fried foods, let’s look at a few other members of the katsu-family you may come across in Japan or abroad.

Other Meats: Chicken, steak and tuna “rare” katsu

For the many reasons one might abstain from pork, there is torikatsu. It’s what you’ll be getting if you order chicken tonkatsu or chicken katsu overseas. I like to think of it as a katsu that was adapted for western tastes back again...

On the other hand, recently popularized rare katsu takes inspiration from searing to flash fry high-quality tuna or steak in a katsu-style panko breading. The mouthfeel retains the juicy quality and envelopes the rare morsels in crunchy katsu-style goodness. It’s the opposite of the humble katsudon and elevates katsu to the luxury dining sphere with wagyu and maguro. Are you drooling yet?



Photo by Eliska Sikulova, byFood



File photo

Kushikatsu

Katsu on a stick! Shove a yakitori stick through just about any bite-sized piece of food, fry it katsu-style, and you get kushikatsu. This style of katsu frying has become popular enough to have its own restaurant chains and is a great way to enjoy many different types of ingredients. Some especially fun takes on kushikatsu are mochi, cheese (mozzarella stick...on a stick. Excellent.), and quail eggs, plus tons of veggies! Kushikatsu is a popular food in Osaka, the city known as the nation’s kitchen.

Bento-box katsu: Menchikatsu and friends

Menchikatsu, a combination of mince-meat menchi and katsuretsu katsu, is essentially a hamburger or meatball that has been katsu deep fried. It is often billed as a “healthy” form of katsu because cabbage and onions are included in the patty. Other bento-box staples like ham cutlet get the katsu treatment too, and korokke use the same panko-frying technique to get their unique soft inside crunchy outside texture.



File photo

Seafood katsu: Ebi-fry and Aji-fry, etc.

Although the name is different, the prep method for making these seafood “fries” is the same as making katsu. Since dishes like ebi fry are made from whole shrimp, aji fry from fish filets, and ika fry from sections of squid, they don’t receive the cutlet-shaped delineation of katsu. If you want a lighter taste with the same katsu crunch, try a fry! As a side note, ebikatsu does actually exist - in the form of a katsu-fried shrimp paste patty. Yum!



File photo

Hirekatsu: Actually, this one is tonkatsu?

Hire(hee-ray)katsu uses leaner cuts and has a reputation for being popular with women since it’s a little more tender, less fatty, and higher quality compared to classic tonkatsu. The characteristic shape of tonkatsu is called “ros” or “roast” katsu, as opposed to hirekatsu. These are still made of pork but tend to come in a nugget or round shape instead of a slab and at a higher price point. The precise cuts for each classification vary depending on where you look, but fat-on pork katsu is usually ros, and lean is typically hire.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood



File photo

How to enjoy tonkatsu

The short answer is: However you like!

Even within Japan, people’s preferences for tonkatsu vary greatly. The classic tonkatsu recipe is simple. Serve a panko breaded and fried sliced pork cutlet with a pile of shredded cabbage and drizzle it with tonkatsu-sauce. In Hokuriku, sauce tonkatsu features a pork cutlet dredged in sauce and served over rice donburi style, sometimes omitting the cabbage altogether. Nagoya is known for its miso-katsu using sweet miso sauce, and of course, you can class the dish up or down as you please. The best thing about katsu, ton or otherwise, is that it is a super versatile and always delicious way to enjoy Japanese food. So go out and explore the wonderful world of katsu!

Fun facts about katsu

The official unofficial companion to tonkatsu is bulldog brand sauce, but plenty of restaurants make their own.

On Bulldog’s English website they assert that it is indeed a form of washoku and not yoshoku. Rengatei, the inventor, calls it yoshoku, though! And so the debate continues...

Katsu sauce is based on British Worcestershire sauce, adapted to Japanese tastes. How’s that for cultural exchange?

Originally, julienned carrots and other root vegetables formed the sides of cotolette, but shredded cabbage was quicker to prepare and its antioxidant properties helped break down the oiliness of tonkatsu, so it won out.

Katsudon is similar to oyakodon made with tonkatsu instead of chicken! You can easily adapt an oyakodon recipe into katsudon at home.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

A ton of information

The word tonkatsu, born of a combination of languages and lifestyles, has taken on a life of its own. In the modern day, Katsu has globe trotted its way to become one of the most recognizable Japanese dishes on the planet, no matter what form it takes. If you’ve ever wondered, “what is whatever-katsu? Is it the same as tonkatsu? Why did they bring me soup?!” hopefully, this article helped.

byFood is a platform for food events in Tokyo, with over 80 experiences to choose from and a fantastic resource for learning about Japan’s thriving food culture! What’s more, byFood runs a charitable outreach program, the Food for Happiness Project, which donates 10 meals to children in Cambodia for each person who books a food event through our platform!

↑↑

FOODS TO PICK UP AT THE KONBINI

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
EMILY SUVANNASANKHA,
BYFOOD

If you're familiar with Japanese popular culture, you've probably heard the hype about Japanese snacks from the konbini, or Japanese convenience store food. They're excellently curated, they come in surprising flavors, and they're the carrot (or rather, Pocky) on a stick fueling me to write my graduate thesis! Whenever I'm feeling stressed about life in a foreign country, the konbini is there on every street corner to remind me of the real reason I packed it up and moved 7000 miles away from everyone I know: for the glorious splendor of Japanese snack food. So let's roam the colorful aisles of Lawson, 7-Eleven, and FamilyMart and pick up these 11 popular Japanese konbini snacks.


byFood

What I look for in Japanese convenience store snacks

As an American, what strikes me as special about Japanese snacks is the unexpectedly accurate flavors. If a Japanese gummy says it tastes like peach, that likely means it tastes like an actual peach fruit, not an artificial approximation. Also, seasonal varieties of konbini food come and go notoriously quickly, so look out for tags that say "New" (新) or "Limited Time" (期間限定) so you don't miss them!

Here are my criteria when looking for the best snacks in Japan:

- Seasonal and limited time varieties
- Accurate flavors
- Quality of taste and texture

Whether it's an old standby like Famichiki or a new twist on a favorite like cherry blossom Pocky, you can't go wrong with any of the following tasty treats.

byFood is a platform for food events in Tokyo, with over 80 experiences to choose from and a fantastic resource for learning about Japan's thriving food culture! What's more, byFood runs a charitable outreach program, the Food for Happiness Project, which donates 10 meals to children in Cambodia for each person who books a food event through our platform!

1. Calbee Jagabee

Calbee Japan makes many of the most popular Japanese crackers and chips, but Calbee Jagabee potato sticks stand out proudly among them. In contrast to Jagariko, a more brittle Calbee snack, Jagabee provides a heartier crunch and rich flavor reminiscent of its glory days as a real potato. I especially recommend my all-time favorite savory Japanese snack, the shoyu (soy sauce) butter flavor of Jagabee!



2. Seasonal Pocky

When you think of popular snacks in Japan, for many foreigners, Pocky naturally springs to mind! Pocky Japan loves to innovate on the already winning premise of chocolate on a biscuit stick, so keep your eyes peeled for special seasonal varieties like heart-shaped cherry blossom in the spring, lemon in the summer, and even Japanese sweet potato in the fall. My top-tier flavor is Winter Butter Caramel Pocky (冬のきらめき), which is so addictive I'd pay Glico to keep it in stock year round!



3. Black Thunder

One of the lesser known snacks to buy in Japan is Black Thunder, a sleeper hit that's bound to have you renewing your visa! Black Thunder is a chocolate-covered candy bar with a cocoa cookie base and Japanese rice puffs, forming a crispy chocolatey delight. Look out for the many twists on this old favorite available in the konbini! In my experience, the custard apple pie flavor and Shittori Premium made with fresh cream are the ones to beat.



4. Sandwiches

Japanese convenience stores are handy not only for their plethora of snacks, but also their quick and easy meal options when traveling. All konbini have a refrigerated section with perfectly triangular sandwiches, filled with quality goodies such as teriyaki chicken katsu, tuna and lettuce, egg, and even special offerings like blueberry jam and whipped cream from time to time!



5. Fresh hot food

The must-try Japanese convenience store foods includes a variety of hot, fresh food kept in glass containers at the register. Here you'll find treats such as the all-powerful Famichiki, FamilyMart's beloved take on impossibly juicy fried chicken, piping hot nikuman meat buns, and occasionally special Hello Kitty-shaped cream buns. A pivotal part of appreciating Japanese junk food is having your world rocked by Famichiki, so I recommend ordering it at least once!



6. Baumkuchen

When it comes to Japanese sweet snacks, baumkuchen takes the cake for me! Technically a German dessert that became disproportionately popular in Japan, baumkuchen is many razor-thin layers of cake baked into a ring of soft deliciousness I didn't know I needed. I constantly spot new spins on the classic cake in the konbini, so check both the regular dessert section and the refrigerated section to join my mission to try them all!



7. Limited time ice cream

No listing of konbini snacks would be complete without a ringing endorsement of Japanese ice cream! The goodies in the konbini freezers rotate within weeks or even days, so check often for seasonal treats like white peach Coolish or custard ice cream melon pan. Whether it's a hazelnut praline ice cream bar with black currant jam from FamilyMart (pictured above) or some other fleeting beauty gone too soon, you'll want to stock up with haste if you find a favorite!



8. Limited time breads

Out of all Japanese convenience store food, the special breads are my oldest and fondest standby. While classics like melon pan and Japanese curry bread may be the saviors of any foreigner looking for a safe but yummy lunch, the bread aisle is often rife with innovations! Keep an eye out for zany new varieties like kinako whipped cream bread or strawberry steamed cakes.



9. Wagashi

If you're hungry for some traditional Japanese wagashi sweets, I especially recommend 7-Eleven Japan snacks! 7-Eleven's original line of wagashi-inspired desserts ranges from matcha cookies to yomogi daifuku to red bean rice cakes, so you can sample a wide variety of unique Japanese confections for cheap.



10. Kirin strong chuuhai

Thirsty for some crisp alcohol to wash down all those Japanese snacks? For me, no trip to a konbini is complete without picking up a tall can of chuuhai, a popular Japanese alcoholic drink that comes in tons of fruity flavors. The seasonal flavors of Kirin Strong, like mixed berry and double ume (Japanese plum), score especially well in my book!



11. Wine/sake in a juice box

An honorable mention goes to these charming little juice boxes filled with one single serving of sake or wine, found in the alcohol section of some konbini. For the novelty factor, I recommend trying an Oni Killer box of sake, just to say you've washed out your inner demons!



Japan's first all-vegan convenience store

Japanese konbini represent many of the wonderful aspects of Japan, filled with colorful novelties, unexpected flavors, and a special appreciation for the changing of the seasons. Whether you're hunting for the perfect Japanese snack food to satisfy your cravings or in need of a quick but quality meal on the go, I hope the konbini brings as much joy to your life as it does to mine!



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