Eating on the Clock

Henry Liu

Eating on the Clock

埼玉県本庄市
Honjo,Japan

Diet of the Migrant Workers

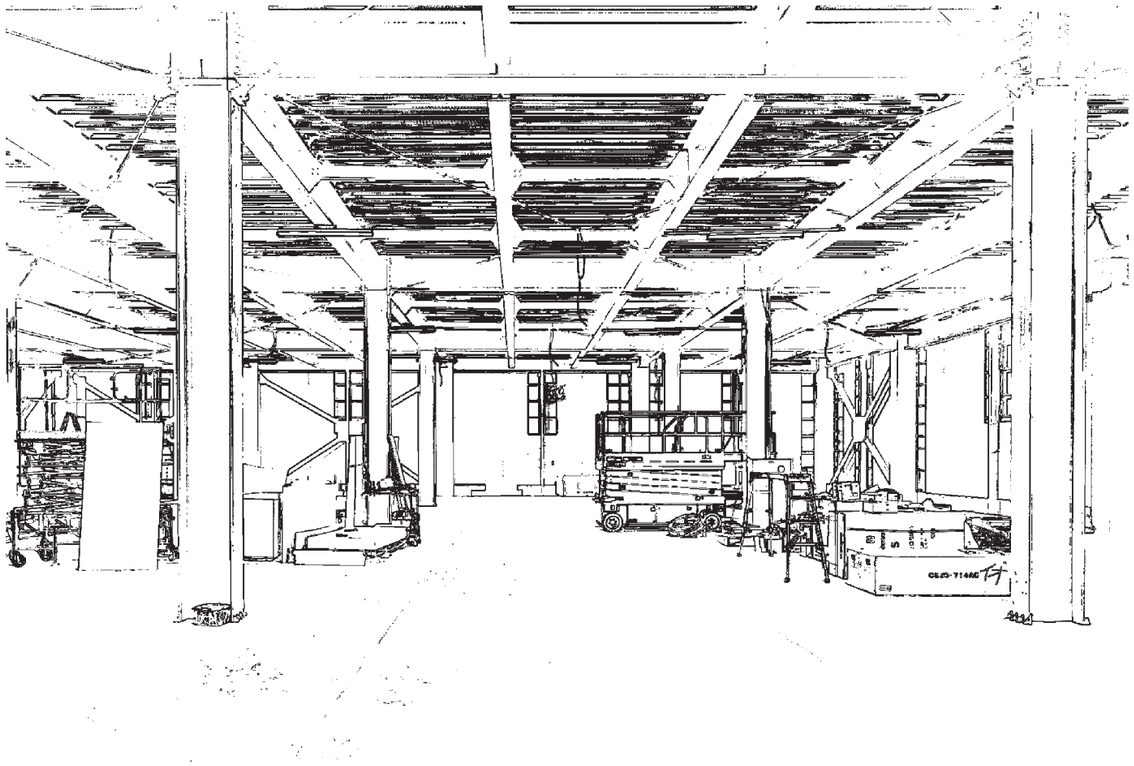
Content

Preface

Chapter 1
Lunch in Transit

Chapter 2
The Konbini Never Sleeps

Chapter 3
Home Begins in the Kitchen



Preface

This cookbook documents how six migrant workers in Japan eat at work and at home. It follows lunches, and dinners cooked after relocations, treating food as a way to see time, wage, and belonging. Photographs and transcripts are presented in a descriptive register. The goal is to show routine meals and how they are made.

The project is framed by themes from: convenience retail as infrastructure, mobility across borders, and the translation of taste through regional supply chains. Fieldwork combined participant observation, short interviews, and sensory notes. I accompanied workers to supermarkets and konbini, recorded prices and brands, and photographed kitchens and eating places between 2024 in Honjo city.

All participants gave informed consent. Images were approved and quotations are in English with selected Japanese, Vietnamese, and Chinese terms retained, translations are mine unless noted, lightly edited for clarity. The chapters pair profiles with recipes, and essays with photographs. They do not seek to generalize beyond what was observed. The book is a record of everyday practice and of the small decisions through which people keep continuity of taste far from home.

What is TITP?

Japan's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) was established as a form of skill transfer, officially framed as international cooperation. In practice, it has become one of the main entry routes for migrant labor, particularly from Vietnam, China, and Indonesia, who sustain Japan's aging and understaffed industries.

These workers often occupy invisible roles within construction, manufacturing, and food processing, their daily routines structured around efficiency and endurance. Within this system, the "lunch break" becomes more than a pause from labor, it is a small act of grounding and self—preservation. Eating, whether a convenience—store bento or a home—cooked meal shared among dormmates, becomes a space where cultural identity and companionship quietly reassert themselves. The lunch break, fleeting yet intimate, symbolizes both adaptation and resistance, an embodied rhythm through which migrant workers reclaim a sense of belonging amid Japan's rigid labor hierarchy.


The day
begins
and ends
with food.

Homemade Bento Lunchbox

Chapter 1
Lunch in Transit

This chapter documents the lunches of six migrant workers from different countries through text and photographs. It describes where meals come from, where they are eaten, and how time, cost, and access shape routine choices. It also notes what they cook after work. Each profile includes a brief interview excerpt and one recipe used in everyday life.

These photographs and dialogues link everyday eating to broader themes of labor, mobility, and belonging: how food systems organize the day, how schedules and wages limit choice, and how cooking maintains continuity far from home. The aim is to record the everyday meals and their making.

Interview with Mr.Xu

Shandong, China
31 Years Old

Construction worker
4th Year in Japan

1. What do you eat most often these days?

Mostly mantou (steamed buns), stir—fried vegetables, and instant noodles. They're quick, cheap, and taste close enough to home. When I first came here, I missed the food from China a lot, but over time I started caring less about taste and more about how full it makes me. I guess that's part of getting used to a new place—your stomach learns before your heart does.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is short, around 20 minutes. Everyone eats fast on site; time belongs to the company. Dinner's longer, maybe 40 minutes. That's the only time I can slow down, cook something, and feel like I'm living for myself. The act of cooking—even just boiling noodles—feels like taking back a bit of control after a day of following orders.

3. If your family or friends came to Japan, where would you take them to eat?

I'd take them to eat ramen or sushi. Ramen reminds me of my first few months here—cheap, warm, something that made me feel like I could survive. Sushi is different—it feels fancy, quiet, clean, almost too perfect. Together they show two sides of life here: the hard, everyday side I live, and the polished one people imagine. Maybe I'd take my family to both, to show them how Japan looks from outside and how it feels from within.

4. What food in Japan is the hardest for you to get used to?

Natto, for sure. I tried it a few times because everyone said it's healthy, but I couldn't handle the smell. Some foods just belong to certain places—they carry the culture inside them. I can eat Japanese dishes now, but natto reminds me that I'll always be a guest here, no matter how long I stay.

5. What food from home do you miss the most?

Jianbing with green onions. It's simple street food, but the smell of it—hot dough, green onion, soybean paste—feels like home. I tried making it here, but the ingredients don't taste the same. Still, I do it once in a while, just to remember. When I flip the pancake and smell it cooking, I feel like I'm standing on my street again for a moment. That's how memory works—it sneaks up through food.


BOSS

6. Do you try foods from other countries or regions?

Yeah, sometimes. I eat Japanese food a lot now, and also Vietnamese pho because some of my coworkers are from Vietnam. We trade dishes sometimes, like giving each other a taste of home. Our lunches are all different, but we sit together anyway. In a way, that's how you build a small kind of family when you're far from your own.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

About 500 to 600 yen if I buy it, maybe 300 if I cook. The store's an eight—minute walk from the site, and that short walk feels like a break. Sometimes I don't even care what I buy. I just want a reason to step outside the noise and breathe. The food's not special, but that moment is.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or share with others?

Most people make their own. A few share with roommates or take turns cooking. Sometimes when one of us makes a big pot of soup, we all eat together. It's not about the food—it's about having a little warmth in a country that doesn't always notice us.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

I spend around 30,000 yen each months. It's not a lot, but it's steady. I try not to waste money, but I also don't skip meals. Eating keeps me grounded. In a life that moves between shifts, dorms, and job sites, food is the one routine that still feels like my own. Every meal reminds me that I'm not just working, but living.

Stir-Fry Noodles

By Mr. Xu

"It's nothing special, just noodles. But I make it my way. Some days I add chili, some days I skip the egg. It depends on what I find at the discount corner. When I eat this, I don't think about home or work too much—it's just my food, made by my hands. That's enough."

Ingredients

2 scallions, chopped
1 packet instant noodles
1 fried egg
1 small sausage
1 handful of spinach or any greens
1 spoonfuls soy sauce
1 spoonful oyster sauce
1 spoonful chili sauce (optional)
1 bottle of tea
½ pound beef (fresh or leftover)

Procedure

1. Fry the egg and sausage until both sides turn golden. Set aside.

2. In another pot, boil the noodles—just until soft, not soggy. Drain well.

3. Heat oil in a pan. Add beef and sear both sides until browned.

4. Toss in chopped garlic and greens; stir—fry quickly.

5.Add the cooked noodles to the same pan and season with soy sauce and oyster sauce.

6. Stir everything together over high heat until the noodles soak up the sauce and smell rich.

7. Sprinkle sesame seeds and scallions, give it a quick toss, and plate it up.

8. Lay the fried egg and sausage on top before serving.

Interview with Mr. Moro'i

Yamaguchi, Japan
55 Years Old

Driver, Material Cutting and Batching Work

1. What have you been eating the most this past month?

Mostly rice, miso soup, and grilled fish. Simple meals, the kind I've always eaten. Sometimes I add pickles or tofu on the side, but I don't need much.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is short everyday. We only have about 15 minutes. Dinner's around 30 minutes. I cook simple things at home, nothing fancy. I've been doing it the same way for years.

3. If your friends or family came to visit, where would you take them to eat?

Probably sushi or an izakaya. Sushi for something special, izakaya food for something comfortable. It's the kind of place where you can drink, eat slowly, and talk without thinking about work.

4. Is there any food in Japan that you find hard to get used to?

Not really. I've lived here my whole life, so I'm used to Japanese food.

5. What food from your hometown do you miss the most?

Fugu (pufferfish) dishes from Yamaguchi. You can eat them anywhere in Japan, but it doesn't taste the same as at home. Maybe it's the water, or just memory. I don't cook it myself — it's better left to professionals.

6. Do you try foods from other countries?

Sometimes. I like Chinese food, and I've tried Vietnamese dishes too. The flavors are different — stronger spices, brighter colors — but interesting.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

Around 600 yen. If I cook at home, it's about 200 yen cheaper. The store is about a 10—minute walk from the site, so I go there often.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or have someone prepare them?

It depends. The married guys usually get lunch made by their wives. The single ones cook for themselves.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

About 40,000 yen. I eat three meals a day, nothing fancy, but I don't skip meals. At my age, I care more about regularity than taste.

Bento with Pork Soboro Rice, Tamagoyaki, Croquette, and Spinach

By Mr.Moro'i

"I make my bento every morning before work. It's mostly the same—rice with salmon flakes, a few pieces of pork, and egg rolls. Nothing fancy, just what I can do fast. I don't like eating out too much; convenience store food is easy, but it feels tired after a while. Cooking by myself makes me feel steady, like the day starts right. I pack it neatly—it's a habit from years of doing this. When I open it at lunch, it's quiet for a bit, like a small break from everything. It is not something very special, but it's mine."

Pork Soboro Rice

Ingredients

1 tbsp soy sauce
1 tbsp mirin
1 tsp sugar
1 splash of sake
1 bowl cooked white rice
100g ground pork

Procedure

1. Heat a small pan over medium flame, add the ground pork.
2. Stir while it cooks — break it up fine with chopsticks.
3. Add soy sauce, mirin, sugar, and sake once the meat turns pale.
4. Keep stirring until the liquid thickens and the pork becomes glossy brown.
5. Spoon the soboro on top of the warm rice, letting the sauce soak slightly in.
6. Let it cool before closing the lunchbox lid — steam fogs everything otherwise.

Tamagoyaki (Japanese Rolled Omelet)

Ingredients

2 eggs
1 tsp sugar
½ tsp soy sauce
1 pinch of salt
1 bit of oil for frying

Procedure

1. Beat the eggs in a small bowl and add sugar, soy sauce, and salt.
2. Heat a rectangular pan and brush it lightly with oil.
3. Pour a thin layer of egg, wait until it sets slightly, then roll it toward you.
4. Pour another thin layer, lift the roll, and repeat — layer after layer.
5. Once it's golden and fluffy, let it rest for a minute.
6. Slice into even pieces.

Spinach with Sesame

Ingredients

1 handful of spinach
1 tbsp ground sesame seeds
1 tsp soy sauce
½ tsp sugar

Procedure

1. Cut the spinach and carrots into thin strips.
2. Boil spinach and carrot for one minute.
3. Drain and squeeze out the extra water.
4. Mix the sesame, soy sauce, and sugar in a small bowl.
5. Toss the spinach in until evenly coated.
6. Spoon into a small corner of the bento

Frozen Croquette

It only takes a few minutes in the air fryer or pan until it turns golden and crisp.

Gyudon

Packaged Gyudon can be heated in the microwave, but I like to pan—fry it instead for a richer flavor.

Interview with Mr. Wang

Yamaguchi, Japan
55 Years Old

Construction worker
2nd Year in Japan

1. What do you eat most often these days?

Mostly rice and la jiao chao rou — stir—fried pork with chili. I grew up eating spicy food, so without chili, I feel like I'm missing something. Sometimes I cook it in the dorm after work; the smell fills the room and reminds me of home. The Japanese chili here tastes different, not as strong, but it still gives me a bit of that fire from Hunan.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is quick — maybe 15 minutes, just enough to eat and get back to the site. Dinner's slower, about 40 minutes. That's my time to cook and relax. Cooking helps me feel human again after a long day. Even when I'm tired, hearing the sound of oil hitting the pan feels like something familiar, something that belongs to me.

3. If your family or friends came to Japan, where would you take them to eat?

Probably Japanese barbecue or conveyor—belt sushi. Barbecue feels close to Chinese style — it's social, loud, full of smell and smoke. You can talk and laugh while grilling the meat. Sushi, though, feels more Japanese — quiet, clean, neat. I think I'd take them to both, to show how food here reflects the rhythm of life: work by the clock, eat by yourself, everything in order.

4. What food in Japan is the hardest for you to get used to?

Raw fish — sashimi. I tried it a few times, but the texture makes me nervous. Where I'm from, food is always cooked, full of heat and spice. Eating something cold and soft feels strange, almost empty. But I also think it says something about the culture here — calm, quiet, polite. It's just different from how we express taste.

5. What food from home do you miss the most?

Duo jiao yu tou — fish head with chopped chili. You can buy fish in Japan, but it never tastes quite right. The spice here is lighter, and the flavor doesn't hit the same. I've made it a few times in the dorm; the smell stays for days, and my roommates complain, but I don't care. When the steam rises and I smell the chili, I feel like I'm back at my kitchen table in Hunan.

6. Do you try foods from other countries or regions?

Yeah, pretty often. I eat Vietnamese pho and sometimes Indian curry. On construction sites, everyone brings different lunches, so we trade sometimes. You get used to mixing flavors — a bit of curry rice one day, noodles the next. After moving around, your stomach becomes more flexible than your passport.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

About 500 yen, maybe less if I make my own. The store's around a ten—minute walk from the site. Some days I go there just to take a break, not even to eat. The air conditioning, the lights, the quiet music — it's the opposite of the construction site. Sometimes I stand there a bit longer, pretending to choose something just to rest my head.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or share with others?

Most people make their own. A few have wives who prepare food for them, and they always look the happiest during lunch. It's good that there's always someone thinking about you. For me, cooking is the way I take care of myself and I enjoy it a lot.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

Around 35,000 yen. It sounds like a lot, but food is what keeps me going. You work long hours, sometimes in the cold or rain, and a hot meal at the end of the day makes all the difference. When I sit down with my bowl of rice and chili, I feel grounded — like I still belong somewhere, even if that place is far away.

Fish Head with Chopped Chili
剁椒鱼头

By Mr. Wang

"Back home, this dish is never eaten alone. You always share it with friends, with family, with noise. Here I eat it by myself, but when I take that first bite, I can almost hear the voices again. It's like the heat brings everyone back for a second." Every family does it a little differently, but it always starts with the same thing: heat and spice. Here in Japan, I can find fish in the supermarket, but it never feels right. The chili's too mild, and the sauce doesn't have that kick. I've made it a few times in the dorm, but the smell stays for days.

Ingredients

1 big fish head, cleaned and split
1 handful of red chili peppers
2 garlics,
2 ginger,
3 green onion
3 spoons of Soy sauce
2 tea spoons of salt
1 splash of cooking wine
1 drizzle of hot oil

Procedure

1. Wash the fish head and rub it with salt and cooking wine. Let it sit while you chop everything

2. Chop the red chili fine—don't be scared of the seeds. That's where the flavor lives.

3. Mix with garlic, ginger, and soy sauce to make a rough paste.

4. Steam the fish head first until it turns white and soft.

5. Spread the chili mix all over the top and steam it again for a few more minutes.

6. Heat some oil until it almost smokes, then pour it over the fish. It hisses, and the smell fills the whole room.

Interview with Mr. Cuong

Vietnam
37 Years Old

Construction work:
6th Year in Japan

1. What do you eat most often these days?

Mostly rice with vegetables and fish sauce. Simple food, the kind I grew up with. I mix boiled vegetables with a bit of chili and fish sauce—it's quick, cheap, and tastes like home. Even when I don't have time to cook, I always keep a small bottle of fish sauce in the dorm. It makes plain rice feel alive.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is short, maybe 15 minutes. We eat fast so we can rest a little before going back to work. Dinner takes around 30 minutes. That's when I slow down and cook something real. Cooking helps me calm down; the smell of garlic and oil in the pan reminds me that I'm still living, not just working.

3. If your family or friends came to Japan, where would you take them to eat?

Probably sushi or ramen. Sushi, because it's something you have to try here—it's quiet, clean, and looks beautiful. Ramen, because it's the opposite—loud, hot, full of flavor. When my friends eat ramen, I think they'd understand a bit about life here: it looks different from Vietnam, but there's still warmth in it.

4. What food in Japan is the hardest for you to get used to?

Natto, for sure. And the really salty pickles. The smell and texture are hard for me. Vietnamese food uses fish sauce, which also smells strong, but the taste is round, layered. Natto feels sticky and strange. I tried to like it—it's healthy, they say—but it's not for me.

5. What food from home do you miss the most?

Pho. I used to eat it every morning before work in Vietnam. The smell of broth and herbs—it's the start of the day. In Japan, you can find pho in restaurants, but it's not the same. The noodles are too thick, and the soup is too clean. Sometimes I make my own version at home. It's not perfect, but when the steam rises, it feels like I'm sitting by the street back in Hanoi.

6. Do you try foods from other countries or regions?

Yes, I like trying new things. I eat Chinese food sometimes, and Korean barbecue with friends. I think once you move abroad, your taste changes—you start mixing things. I still love Vietnamese flavors, but I also enjoy the spice from Korean food and the strong sauce from Chinese dishes.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

About 600 yen. If I cook myself, it's closer to 200. The convenience store is just five minutes away from the site, so sometimes I go there even when I don't plan to. The food there isn't amazing, but it's easy, and after a long morning, it feels good.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or share with others?

Most people make their own. Everyone's got their own small kitchen in the dorm. Sometimes we share when someone cooks something special—like when I make pho, people come by just to smell it. That kind of small sharing makes the dorm feel less lonely.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

Around 32,000 yen. I try not to spend too much, but food is important. It's the only part of the day that feels like mine. When I eat, I feel connected—to my country, to my past, to myself.

Thit Kho Tau with Salad

By Mr. Cuong

"My mom used to make this on Sundays for our family, when the whole house smelled of caramel and fish sauce. She'd simmer it for hours, tasting and adjusting until the pork was soft and the eggs turned golden. This dish takes time, but it lasts a few days. The flavor gets better the next morning. I cook it at night when it's quiet, let it simmer while I scroll through my phone. The smell fills the whole room. It feels like company."

Ingredients

- *½ lb pork belly, cut into chunks*
- *2 boiled eggs, peeled*
- *2 tbsp fish sauce*
- *1 tbsp sugar*
- *1 tbsp soy sauce*
- *1 clove garlic, minced*
- *1 cup coconut water (or water if not available)*
- *1 Pinch of black pepper*

Procedure

1. Heat a pan and melt the sugar until it turns amber — that's your caramel base.
2. Add pork pieces, stirring until they're lightly browned and coated.
3. Pour in fish sauce, soy sauce, and garlic. Stir for a minute.
4. Add the coconut water and eggs. Simmer on low heat for about 30–40 minutes until the sauce thickens and the pork turns tender.
5. Taste and adjust — a little more fish sauce for salt, or a bit of sugar for balance.

Interview with Mr. Lanh

Electric Work
30 Years Old

Vietnam
3rd Year in Japan

1. What do you eat most often these days?

Mostly rice with stir—fried vegetables. Sometimes I add eggs or tofu if I'm tired of meat. It's easy, fast, and reminds me of home. Even simple fried cabbage with garlic tastes like something warm from my mother's kitchen.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is about 20 minutes. We eat quick at the site, everyone with their own bento or something from the konbini. Dinner takes around 30 minutes — that's when I cook properly. Cooking helps me relax a bit after work. It's quiet, and I can listen to music while chopping vegetables.

3. If your family or friends came to Japan, where would you take them to eat?

Ramen or tempura. Ramen because it's warm and full of flavor — a comfort food here, like pho back home. Tempura because it looks clean, golden, and crispy — something that feels special. I'd want them to see both sides of Japanese food: the quick everyday bowl and the kind you sit down and enjoy slowly.

4. What food in Japan is hardest for you to get used to?

Sashimi. I don't really like raw food. The first time I tried it, I didn't know what to think — cold, soft, no spice. I prefer something hot, something with garlic or chili. But I respect how much care Japanese people put into preparing it. It just doesn't match my taste.

5. What food from home do you miss the most?

Vietnamese spring rolls. I make them often here because you can find the ingredients — rice paper, vegetables, meat, noodles. I roll them up by hand, the same way my mother taught me. When I eat them, I feel close to home. It's the kind of food that carries memory — the smell of herbs, the sound of the wrapper cracking when you bite it.

6. Do you try foods from other countries or regions?

Yes, I like Korean kimchi nabe (hot pot) and Chinese stir—fries. I think food is one of the easiest ways to learn about another country. Even if I don't speak the language well, when we eat together, it feels familiar. Everyone understands good food.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

About 500 yen. If I cook, I save around 150 or 200 yen. The store's about eight minutes from the site. Sometimes, even if I have food from home, I still stop by for a drink or something sweet — it's like a small break from work.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or share with others?

Most people cook their own. Sometimes roommates help each other out — one cooks rice, the other makes soup. It saves time, and it's nice to eat something that feels shared.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

Around 30,000 yen. Food is where I let myself spend a bit more. It's not just for eating but how I stay connected to home. When I cook Vietnamese dishes, I feel balanced again,

like "my day makes sense."

Ca Kho To
Caramelized Claypot Fish

By Mr. Lanh

"I started cooking this after moving to Japan, when I couldn't find the taste I missed. The fish here is different, the sauce too light, but I still make it the way my mom taught me. Take everything slowly, until the sauce turns dark and sticky, clinging to the pot. The smell fills my small kitchen and drifts out the window. It doesn't taste exactly like home, but it's close enough to make me feel less far away"

Ingredients

- *½ cup water*
- *1 medium fish (catfish or mackerel), cut into thick slices*
- *1 tbsp sugar*
- *1 tbsp soy sauce*
- *1 clove garlic, minced*
- *1 Black pepper*
- *2 red chilis (optional)*
- *2 tbsp fish sauce*
- *2 scallions*

Procedure

1. Sprinkle sugar into a claypot or pan, heat until it melts and turns amber.
2. Add fish pieces and garlic, coat gently in the caramel.
3. Pour in fish sauce, soy sauce, chili, and water.
4. Simmer on low heat for 30–40 minutes until the sauce thickens and turns glossy brown.
5. Finish with black pepper and chopped scallions. Serve with hot rice.

Interview with Mr. Tien

Foundation Work
32 Years Old

Vietnam
4th Year in Japan

1. What do you eat most often these days?

Mostly rice and chicken dishes. Sometimes grilled, sometimes cooked with soy sauce or garlic. Chicken is easy to find and cheap. I don't get tired of it; I grew up eating them every day.

2. How long do you usually spend eating or cooking for lunch and dinner?

Lunch is quick — about 15 minutes. We eat fast on site. Dinner takes longer, maybe 40 minutes. That's when I actually cook something. It's quiet then, and cooking helps me relax after the day.

3. If your family or friends came to Japan, where would you take them to eat?

Probably sushi or barbecue. Sushi because it's something everyone wants to try — it's clean, careful, and kind of elegant. Barbecue because it's loud, warm, and you can sit and talk while the meat cooks. I think both show two sides of Japan — polite and peaceful, but also full of energy.

4. What food in Japan is the hardest for you to get used to?

Natto and raw egg over rice. The smell of natto is too strong, and raw egg feels strange to me. In Vietnam, we also eat some foods fresh or lightly cooked, but the texture of raw egg is different — too slimy, I guess. I've tried it a few times, but it's not something I enjoy.

5. What food from home do you miss the most?

Beef pho. You can find it in some shops here, but it doesn't taste the same. The broth in Japan is too clean — it's missing that deep, rich flavor from the bones. Sometimes I make it myself in the dorm on weekends. It takes time, but when the smell fills the room, it feels like home for a while.

6. Do you try foods from other countries or regions?

Yes, I like Chinese stir—fried dishes and Indian curry. Both are bold — lots of spice, lots of flavor. I eat with my coworkers sometimes, and we mix food from different places. It doesn't taste exactly like any one country, but it's fun.

7. How much do you usually spend on lunch from the convenience store?

Around 600 yen. If I cook, I save maybe 200 yen. The konbini is about 10 minutes from the site. Sometimes I go just for a break — the air—conditioning, the bright lights, it feels clean and calm inside.

8. Do your coworkers usually make their own lunches or share with others?

Most people make their own. Everyone's got different food, different routines. Sometimes someone brings something extra, like fruit or snacks, and we share.

9. About how much do you spend on food each month?

Around 33,000 yen. Food is what keeps me steady. Even if the work is hard, a good meal makes the day feel normal again.

Beef Pho

By Chef Cuong

"I cook pho when I miss mornings in Hanoi — the street noise, the smell of broth, people talking over plastic tables. Here, it's quiet. I eat alone, but when I close my eyes, I can almost hear the motorbikes outside again."

Ingredients

- *1 pack of rice noodle*
- *1 spoons of Fish Sauce*
- *1 tea spoons of salt*
- *1 pieces of ginger*
- *1 ginger*
- *½ onion*
- *½ lime*
- *2 pieces of beef or bones*
- *2 cilantro*
- *2 mint leaf*

Procedure

1. I boil the beef bones or meat first, just enough to clean them. Then I start again with fresh water.
2. Add onion, ginger, and star anise — they make the broth smell like home. Let it simmer for a long time, at least an hour, sometimes more if I'm not in a rush.
3. Cook the rice noodles in another pot, rinse them so they stay soft but not sticky.
4. Slice the meat thin and lay it over the noodles. Pour the hot broth on top so it cooks slightly in the bowl.
5. Add fish sauce, herbs, and chili to taste. I never measure — I just go by smell and memory.

Chapter 2

The Konbini never Sleeps

Open late or all night, the Konbini converts hunger into a scheduled act: standardized bentos, reheatable noodles, and small cups of coffee purchased and consumed within minutes. Bright aisles and predictable stock present neutrality, but they function as infrastructure: aligning appetite with logistics, wage schedules, and the tempo of shift work. For migrant workers, the konbini lowers barriers of language and access: clear labels, self—checkout routines, ready—to—eat food, while narrowing choice through price, pace, and place. Cooking time becomes purchasing time; the kitchen is outsourced to packaging, microwaves, and barcodes. Within this managed field, people still mark preference: discount timing, brand habits, one reliable sauce, or the same onigiri.

The konbini never sleeps because work never stops. Its light runs parallel to the rhythm of 24—hour labor, syncing hunger with productivity. The warmth of packaged rice and fried chicken hides a deeper chill — time itself has been mechanized. To eat is to align one's body with the machine's pace.

Every barcode scanned, every microwave beep, becomes part of a larger choreography of consumption. Rest is absorbed back into production. In this quiet system, even hunger has a schedule. The rice is warm, but the time is cold.

Konbini
コンビニ

Standing to eat is still a meal. To eat is to keep pace with the city.

Cooking time becomes purchasin g time.

Warm rice, fast time. Access is easy; belonging is not. Th e microwave marks the shift: ding.

Standing to eat is still a meal. To eat is to keep pace with the city.

Cooking time becomes purchasin g time.

Warm rice, fast time. Access is easy; belonging is not. Th e microwave marks the shift: ding.

Food as Infrastructure

The konbini stands at every corner, glowing through the night. It feels open and equal — anyone can walk in, anyone can eat. But its perfect order hides a deeper architecture of control. The rows of bentos, drinks, and snacks form a kind of edible schedule: fast, uniform, predictable. Choice exists only within what has already been prepared, priced, and packaged.

For migrant workers, this infrastructure is both safety and cage — the convenience store replaces the kitchen, offering warmth without intimacy. The transaction replaces care. In a city that runs on precision, the konbini's lights promise comfort, but they also whisper efficiency.

Food as Class Marker

What and where one eats quietly defines social boundaries. The salaryman's lunch set and the factory worker's instant noodles exist in the same city but not the same world. The konbini, with its bright equality, flattens difference on the surface — everyone buys the same onigiri — yet the repetition of convenience reveals who has no time, no kitchen, no choice.

A cheap bento is not just a meal; it's an economic measure of rest, health, and agency. Within its plastic box sits the cost of time

The Konbini Never Sleeps


218
てまえどり
に ご協力ください
食品ロス削減へのご協力、ありがとうございます。


Keep

“Somewhere between hunger and home.”

"I bought lunch from the konbini today. Same store as always, just a few minutes from the site. I didn’t really think, I just grabbed what looked filling: a chicken bento and a can of Monster. The bento has rice on one side and fried chicken on the other. The rice is soft, a little sticky, with black sesame on top. The chicken’s covered in creamy sauce, sweet and salty at the same time. It tastes okay, a bit heavy, but it keeps me full.

—Lanh

"The City Feeds worker with predictable taste"

"We went to the konbini (convenience store) for lunch, the same one we always go to near the site. It’s bright and cold inside, with that smell of fried food and coffee. I didn’t really think much about it—I just grabbed what looked easy to eat. Cold soba noodles with kakiage on top, and a small carton of orange smoothie."

—Wang

“Every bite belongs to someone’s work.”

”I bought lunch from the konbini near the site. I got pasta again, and an energy drink. It’s the fastest when you’re too tired to think. I grab it on the way back from picking up materials. The Monster isn’t really about taste anymore. It’s more like fuel. It’s something that keep your eyes open.

We eat in the corner of the building, near the cables and boxes. Some talk on the phone, some scroll on their screens. We don’t talk much, but you can tell we’re all getting through the day.“

—Tien

Natto

Natto is a traditional Japanese food made from fermented soybeans. Sticky, stringy, and sharply scented, it's often mixed with soy sauce or mustard and eaten over hot rice for breakfast. For many Japanese people, it's a symbol of home, healthy, and ordinary.

なっとう

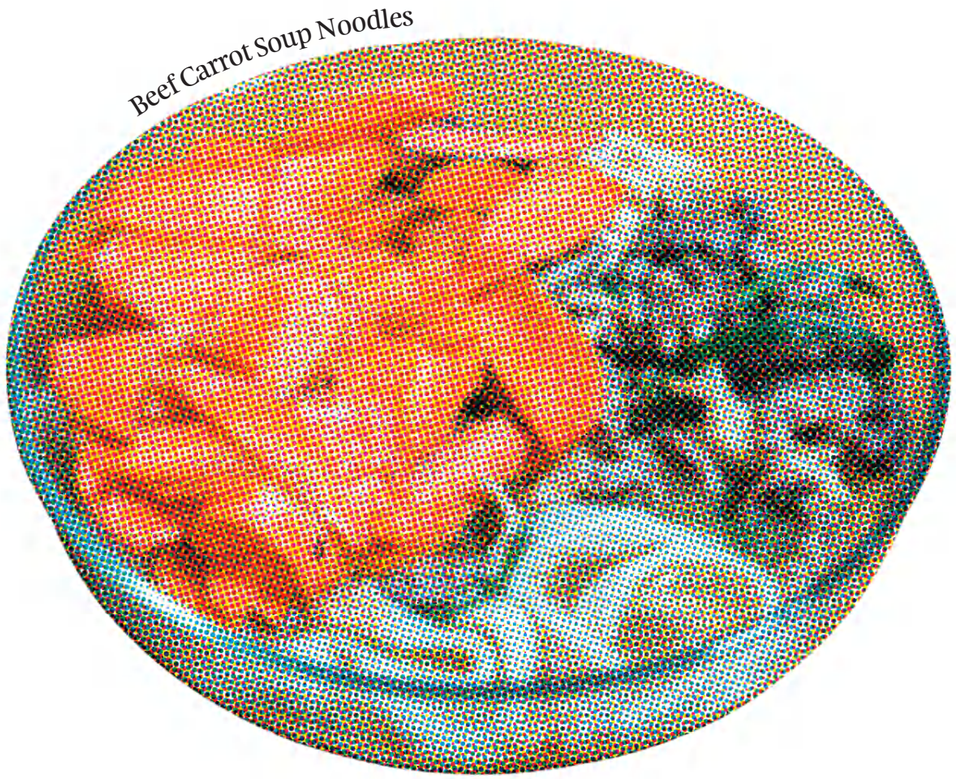
But in the interviews, almost every worker laughed and said the same thing: "Natto is the one thing I just can't eat."

They described the smell as "like tofu left out too long," and the texture as "something that clings to your chopsticks no matter how hard you shake."

For those who didn't grow up with it, natto isn't just strange and overwhelming. The taste demands familiarity to make sense.

In Japan, it stands for comfort and health.


PIPELINE PUNCH
KAGOME
smoothie
MONSTER
ENERGY



Chapter 3

Home Begins in the Kitchen

This section presents a field investigation of evening cooking among migrant workers in Japan, read through lenses from East Asian Studies. We follow participants from convenience retail, konbini, and neighborhood supermarkets into dorm kitchens, tracing how infrastructure and temporality (shift schedules, commute time) shape procurement and preparation. Shopping lists, brand choices, and unit prices situate meals within regional commodity chains — rice and soy sauce sourced in Japan: fish sauce, oyster sauce, shacha or doubanjiang circulating through East Asian markets and discount aisles. Cooking in shared rooms, with limited tools, becomes a form of domesticity—in—motion, small acts of care performed after wage labor.

Field Notes observation: After Work Cooking

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

What Home Tastes Like

The Vietnamese Condiments

1. Sate Chilli Oil (S a t e)
2. Soy Sauce (N u o c t u o n g)
3. Sugar (Đ u o n g)
4. Fish Sauce (N u o c m a m)
5. Fermented Anchovy Sauce (M a m n ê m)
6. Chili Sauce (T u o n g o t)
7. Fermented Soybean Sauce (T u o n g đ e n)
8. Black Pepper (T i ê u)
9. Coconut Cream (N u o c c o t d u a)
10. Lemongrass (S a)
11. Shrimp Paste (M a m r u o c)
12. Dried Shrimp (T é p k h ô)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

What Home Tastes Like

The Chinese Condiments

1. SoySauce (生 抽)
2. Vinegar (陈 醋)
3. White Pepper (白 胡 椒)
4. Chilli Bean Sauce (辣 豆 瓣 酱)
5. Cooking Wine (料 酒)
6. Chili Oil (老 干 妈)
7. Oyster Sauce (蚝 油)
8. Sichuan Peppercorn (川 花 椒)
9. Fermented Black Beans (豆 豉)
10. Fermented Tofu (腐 乳)
11. Sweet Bean Sauce (甜 面 酱)
12. Sesame Paste (芝 麻 酱)

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

What Home Tastes Like

The Japanese Condiments

1. SoySauce (醤 油)
2. Mirin (味 醂)
3. White Vinegar (米 酢)
4. Furikake (ふ り か け)
5. Sanshō (山 椒)
6. Kombu (昆 布)
7. Miso (味 噌)
8. Katsuobushi (鰹 節)
9. Shichimi Togarashi (七 味 唐 辛 子)
10. Wasabi (山 葵)
11. Dashi (出 汁)
12. Sake (清 酒)


FamilyMart
登録番号：T5011802028479
2025年 1月30日（木）18:12
レジ 1-6238
ニューシュー（14コイン）
おいしい牛乳450
8%対象税等
（8%消費税等）
「軽」は軽減税率対象商品です。
FamilyMart
東京都千代田区外神田4丁目6－1
電話：03-5298-7074
登録番号：T5011802028479
2025年 1月30日（木）18:12
レジ 1-6238
ニューシュー（14コイン）
おいしい牛乳450
8%対象税等
（8%消費税等）
「軽」は軽減税率対象商品です。
LAWSON
旅客晚交运行李
Late Check-in
旅客签名
SIGNATURE
登机牌
BOARDING PASS
中國東方航空
CHINA EASTERN
经济舱
ECONOMY CLASS
座位号
SEAT
12D
舱位
CLASS
K
登机口
GATE
7
登机时间
BD TIME
13：05


ご搭乗券
函館
JAL587
普通席
12
12:45
02/08
27B
保安検査場／搭乗口でバーコードをかざしてください。
BOARDING GROUP 2
スギ薬局
【領収証】
登録番号 T7180301010951
ご利用いただき、ありがとうございます
通天閣店 06-6630-1511
2025年06月10日(火)10:39
合計/ 2点 ¥311
(8%税 対象 ¥138)
(8%税 ¥10)
(10%税 対象 ¥173)
(10%税 ¥15)
(税合計 ¥25)
バーコード ¥311
決済ブランド Alipay Plus
決済金額 ¥311
商品の返品・交換は7日以内です
お客様相談フリーダイヤル
TEL 0120-921-771(10:00-19:00)
*印は軽減税率(8%)適用商品です
ご搭乗券
東京／羽田
JAL518
普通席
12
17:00
02/13
54C
保安検査場／搭乗口でバーコードをかざしてください。
マイル受付済
BOARDING GROUP3
JAL
JAPAN AIRLINES
ご搭乗券
JAL2869
02/01
16:55
普通席
SAPPORO OKADAMA
KUSHIRO
1
16:45
09D
保安検査場は 20 分前までに通過してください。
BOARDING GROUP 4
ETKT

The grocery store near the dorm closes at ten. By the time the shift ends, it's already dark, but the fluorescent aisles still glow like daylight. Workers move slowly through the narrow rows — the pace finally their own. Some pick out discounted vegetables, checking each leaf carefully; others stand for a while before the instant noodles, deciding between flavor or price. The air smells faintly of detergent and steamed rice from the bento section.

When I first came to Japan, even grocery shopping felt like translation work.

I didn't know which soy sauce tasted right, or if natto counted as breakfast. The packages were bright and loud, but their meanings were quiet—smiling mascots, dense kanji, endless types of curry.

Months later, I began to recognize things not by words, but by color and memory: the green cap of Kewpie mayonnaise, the red box of S&B curry, the blue carton of Meiji milk. These brands became familiar, but never intimate.

Each purchase still feels like imitation—learning how to live without truly belonging.I move through the aisles confidently but not comfortably, fluent in packaging. For others, it's just a supermarket. For me, it's a quiet negotiation between what I miss and what I can replace, between home and survival.


A 豪州産牛肉ばら ﾌﾞﾛｯｸ
保存温度 4℃以下
(税込価格 708円)
加工日25. 9.29 消費期限 25.10. 1
656
100g当り(円) 199 正味量 309g 本体価格(円)
Dole 加工者 株式会社ノベルティ 本社工場
埼玉県本庄市東3-5-18
4061
2 544061 006567
雪国 まいたけ 極白
生姜
ビタミン D E 豊富
黄金色の彩り 赤玉
25.10.11
25.10.11
25.10.11
25.10.11
kurebelc


チンゲン菜
IBARAKI
Fresh Vegetable
https://osharenegi.com
4 鶏なのにまるでホルモン？！親鶏焼肉（中）
加工日25. 9.29 消費期限 25.10. 1
406円
376
129
272g
加工者 株ベルク ベスタ本庄寿店
埼玉県本庄市寿３－５－１８

Stir—fried Green Peppers and Eggs

By Chinese Workers

When I think of home, I taste stir-fried pork with green peppers. The heat rises fast, oil flashes, garlic hits the pan, and the peppers soften just enough to stay bright. My mother cooked it on weeknights—rice steaming, windows fogged, the whole room smelling clean and sharp. The meat was thin, the sauce light, the peppers a little bitter in a good way. In Japan I make it with what I can find. One plate, a bowl of rice, and for a few minutes the day feels familiar.

Ingredients

3	*green peppers*
3	*eggs*
½	*onion*
1	*tsp of salt*
1	*splash of soy sauce*
1	*drizzle of cooking oil*

Procedure

1. Cut. Slice the green peppers into big, uneven pieces — not too thin, they should still have a bit of crunch. Chop the onion roughly.

2. Beat. Crack the eggs into a metal bowl and whisk with chopsticks. Add a pinch of salt.

3. Fry the eggs first. Heat oil in a pan until it shimmers. Pour in the eggs, let them set a little, then push them around with chopsticks so they turn soft and fluffy. Take them out before they overcook.

4. Stir—fry the vegetables. Add a bit more oil, toss in the onion first. When it smells sweet, add the green peppers. Stir until the color brightens.

5. Add the eggs back in, a splash of soy sauce and a pinch more salt. Mix everything quickly — just enough so the eggs pick up the pepper's smell.

The first dish comes together fast: eggs, green peppers, onions. A pale yellow tangle, still steaming. It smells faintly sweet from the onion, sharp from the pepper. Someone tastes and adds more salt. No one measures.

Back at the dorm, the kitchen feels cramped but alive. Jackets are thrown on the backs of chairs, helmets on the floor. Someone plugs in a small speaker playing Vietnamese pop at low volume. The table is metal and scratched; the light hums faintly overhead.

いただきます

Bon appetit.

Stir–fried Beef with Winter Melon

By Vietnamese Workers

At home in Vietname we cooked stir-fried beef with winter melon when the weather turned humid. The melon went in first, cut into thin slabs, turning glassy in the heat; beef followed—marinated with soy, a little starch, and pepper—so it stayed soft. The sauce was light: ginger, garlic, a splash of cooking wine, then soy to finish. The melon kept its bite but soaked the broth, clean and cool against the meat. It tastes simple, clear, and steady—one plate that makes rice go fast.

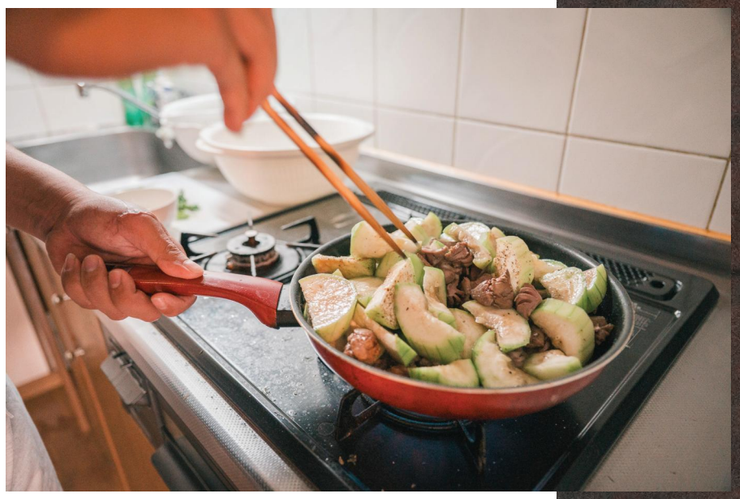
Ingredients

300g	*beef slices*
1	*medium winter melon*
2	*cloves garlic, minced*
1	*tbsp fish sauce*
1	*tbsp soy sauce*
1	*tsp sugar*
1	*pinch of black pepper*
1	*tbsp cooking oil*
3	*cilantro*

Procedure

1. Slice the beef thinly and marinate with soy sauce, fish sauce, sugar, and pepper. Let it sit for 10 minutes.
2. Peel and slice the winter melon into half—moon pieces, around 1 cm thick.
3. Heat oil in a pan over medium heat. Add garlic and stir until fragrant.
4. Add the beef and stir—fry quickly until it turns brown but still tender. Remove and set aside.
5. In the same pan, add a little more oil if needed, then toss in the winter melon. Stir—fry for 3–4 minutes until it turns slightly translucent.
6. Return the beef to the pan, mix well, and let everything simmer together for another minute.
7. Taste and adjust seasoning with fish sauce or salt if needed.
8. Sprinkle with chopped scallions and cilantro before serving.


Garlic
Cilantro
Beef
Winter Melon



Acknowledgments

My thanks to the six participants and to the friends who helped with interpretation and access. Thanks to store staff who allowed observation in aisles and to those who read early drafts. Any errors are mine.

Eating on *the Clock*