

# It's not as world-famous as ramen or sushi. But the humble onigiri is soul food in Japan.

By **Yuri Kageyama**  
The Associated Press

**T**OKYO — The word “onigiri” became part of the Oxford English Dictionary this year, proof that the humble sticky-rice ball and mainstay of Japanese food has entered the global lexicon.

The rice balls are stuffed with a variety of fillings and typically wrapped in seaweed. It's an everyday dish that epitomizes “washoku” — the traditional Japanese cuisine that was designated a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage a decade ago.

Onigiri is “fast food, slow food, and soul food,” says Yusuke Nakamura, who heads the Onigiri Society, a trade group in Tokyo.

Fast because you can find it even at convenience stores. Slow because it uses ingredients from the sea and mountains, he said. And soul food because it's often made and consumed among family and friends. No tools are needed, just gently cupped hands.

“It's also mobile, food on the move,” he said.

Onigiri in its earliest form is believed to go back at least as far as the early 11th century; it's mentioned in Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*. It appears in Akira Kurosawa's classic 1954 film *Seven Samurai* as the ultimate gift of gratitude from the farmers.

## What exactly goes into onigiri?

The sticky characteristic of Japanese rice is key.

What's placed inside is called “gu,” or filling. A perennial favorite is umeboshi, or salted plum. Or perhaps mentaiko, which is hot, spicy roe. But in principle, anything



can be placed inside onigiri, even sausages or cheese.

Then the ball is wrapped with seaweed. Even one nice big onigiri would make a meal, although many people would eat more.

## Some stand by the classic onigiri

Yosuke Miura runs Onigiri Asakusa Yadoroku, a restaurant founded in 1954 by his grandmother. Yadoroku, which roughly translates to “good-for-nothing,” is named for her husband, Miura's grandfather. It claims to be one of the oldest onigiri restaurants in Tokyo.

There are just two tables. The counter has eight chairs. Takeout is an option, but you still have to stand in line.

“Nobody dislikes onigiri,” said Miura, smiling behind a wooden counter. In a display case before him are bowls of gu, including salmon, shrimp, and miso-

flavored ginger. “It's nothing special basically. Every Japanese has 100% eaten it.”

Also a classical flautist, Miura sees onigiri as a score handed down from his grandmother, one which he will reproduce faithfully.

“In classical music, you play what's written on the music sheet. Onigiri is the same,” he says. “You don't try to do something new.”

Yadoroku is tucked away in the quaint old part of Tokyo called Asakusa. It opens at 11:30am and closes when it runs out of rice, usually within the hour. Then it opens again for dinner. The most expensive onigiri costs 770 yen (\$4.90), with salmon roe, while the cheapest is 319 yen (\$2). That includes miso soup. No reservations are taken.

Although onigiri can be round or square,

**COMFORT FOOD.** Yosuke Miura makes a rice ball with pieces of grilled salmon at Onigiri Asakusa Yadoroku, Tokyo's oldest onigiri restaurant. The word “onigiri” became part of the Oxford English Dictionary this year. The humble sticky-rice ball, a mainstay of Japanese food, has entered the global lexicon. See page 15 to view an onigiri recipe. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

animal or star-shaped, Miura's standard is the triangular ones. He makes them to order, right before your eyes, taking just 30 seconds for each.

He places the hot rice in triangular molds that look like cookie cutters, rubs salt on his hands, and then cups the rice — three times to gently firm the sides. The crisp nori, or seaweed, is wrapped like a kerchief around the rice, with one end up so it stays crunchy.

The first bite is just nori and rice. The gu comes with your second bite.

“The Yadoroku onigiri will not change until the end of Earth,” Miura said with a grin.

## Others want to experiment

Miyuki Kwarada runs Taro Tokyo Onigiri, which has four outlets in Japan. She is eyeing Los Angeles, too, and then Paris. Her vision: to make onigiri “the world's fast food.”

The name Taro was chosen because it's common, the Japanese equivalent of John or Michael. Onigiri, she says, has mass appeal because it's simple to make, is gluten-free, and is versatile.

And other Japanese foods like ramen and sushi have found worldwide popularity, she notes.

At her cheerful, modern shop, workers wearing khaki-colored company t-shirts busily prepare the gu and rice balls in a

*Continued on page 15*

**There's power  
in being prepared  
for wildfire season.**



Get ready:  
[portlandgeneral.com/beready](http://portlandgeneral.com/beready)