

longform



Downsizing dinner

The average caloric intake of Japan is falling, but not because of any diet. Older citizens, shrinking appetites and single households all play a part.

ALEX K.T. MARTIN
STAFF WRITER

Setsuko Yoshizumi loves to cook. "My husband is a bit of a picky eater, so I took care preparing healthy dishes for him—all three meals," she says. This was her routine for decades prior to this summer, when her husband broke his leg and had to be hospitalized. He's still recovering at a rehabilitation center, leaving Yoshizumi, 83, on her own.

She visits her husband regularly, but this sudden solitude, combined with the record-breaking heat of the past few months, has been taxing, disrupting her ability to plan out meals to cook for herself. Therefore, she has resorted to dining on a wide variety of ready-to-eat retort pouch foods, the kinds that can be microwaved or boiled. Also on her menu are pre-cut packaged vegetables and health-conscious bento lunches. "It's impossible to eat, for example, a whole cabbage by myself," says Yoshizumi, a resident of Yamagata Prefecture.

Yoshizumi is a member of Japan's expanding elderly demographic, whose decisions and habits are transforming the culinary landscape of the country with the world's oldest population.

The busy life of an urban office worker in Japan means less time for cooking a proper meal and sitting down to dinner with your family. As a result, the number of people who dine on their own is on the rise, which could lead to health problems later in life.

LANCE HENDERSTEIN



Along with a growing number of one-person households, demand for nutritious, single-serving meals is soaring amid a decrease in the nation's overall energy intake. The phenomenon is closely linked to the plight of rural shoppers who lack easy access to grocery stores, leading to a proliferation of mobile supermarket services and other meal solutions.

Last month, on the eve of a national holiday called Respect for the Aged Day, the government announced that the nation had reached a statistical milestone: The number of people age 80 and over now tops 10% of the entire population. Those 65 and older—defined as being elderly in Japan—account for 29.1%, another record-high.

Meanwhile, the overall average per capita energy intake of the populace slipped slightly from 1,911 calories in 2007 to 1,907 in 2017, according to a report by the agriculture ministry's Policy Research Institute. Looking ahead, however, assuming past trends of declining consumption continue, this figure could fall to an average 1,648 calories per day by 2050, the report added. (For comparison, according to the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans report, adult women need anywhere from 1,600 to 2,400 calories a day, and adult men need anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 calories a day.)

So, what does that mean? More people are eating like Yoshizumi, opting for processed foods with smaller servings that don't sacrifice nutrition. With the population graying and the number of marriages dwindling, one-person households are expected to account for over 30% of all food expenditures by 2035, while the ratio of households headed by a person of the age of 65 or older is likely to top 40% by the same year.

What many businesses in Japan are facing, then, is a market in which a growing number of consumers are older, alone and eating less.

"I find there are many retort-packed and

prepared foods available for the elderly that are quite tasty and nutritious," Yoshizumi says. "So I try to use them when I am tired or not feeling well."

Diminishing appetite

Last year, the number of newborns in Japan fell below 800,000 for the first time since record-keeping began in 1899, while the number of deaths rose 8.9% to 1.58 million. Meanwhile, the population has been steadily falling since peaking at 128 million in 2008, and is expected to slip below 100 million by 2056.

According to market research firm Intage, "As the population declines, so too will the number of stomachs to fill. People also tend to eat less as they get older, meaning we can expect the market related to food and beverages to shrink as the nation grays."

The company estimates that the combined market size of food, beverages and alcoholic drinks will fall from ¥18.1 trillion in 2022 to ¥16.6 trillion in 2030. Businesses, meanwhile, are offering more personalized and customized food and beverage solutions to entice a shrinking pool of consumers.

Topvalu, a private discount brand run by retail behemoth Aeon, recently launched a series of chilled prepared meals that includes a Thai chicken dish and Taiwanese minced-pork rice bowl. The firm had already been investing heavily in smaller portions, having rolled out hot pot sets that can be made in single servings.

"The product strategy of our private brand Topvalu includes the development of new products for single-person households," says Makoto Sueyoshi, a spokesperson for Aeon, which operates more than 500 supermarkets across Japan.

Even pizza, typically shared among family or friends, is downsizing. In February, Domino's Japan, the nation's largest pizza delivery chain, introduced My Domino's, a meal set that allows customers to order a small, 7-inch pizza with two side dishes for a reasonable price.



Businesses are already starting to cater to the single, older customer by offering smaller meals that in many cases emphasize nutrition.

LANCE HENDERSTEIN

"Single consumers are growing, not only in Japan but in the world, and the question is how we can reach these people, how we can offer something special for these customers," says Martin Steenk, CEO of Domino's Japan. "The bento is always for one person, so why not create a pizza for one person? This was actually the biggest reason for us behind this whole set up."

The concept proved a hit and according to Domino's Japan, more than 2 million orders had been placed as of July 15. In addition, the company offers pizza rice bowls and pizza sandwiches—also targeting single consumers—and is trying to reach out to older customers who are typically less tech savvy compared to their younger counterparts.

"A majority of those 65 and older order during lunch, but they don't use things like apps, they just come to the stores," Steenk says. "We need to find other ways to connect with them."

The perfect diet

The traditional Japanese diet is centered around rice and typically consists of multiple dishes that feature seafood, specifically fish, as well as plant-based, pickled and fermented foods.

Known as "washoku," the meals are high

While Japanese cities are filled with supermarkets, convenience stores and other places to eat, older people in the countryside are facing a tougher time trying to get the basic necessities. This has led to an increase in mobile supermarkets that bring the grocery shopping experience to people's front doors.

LANCE HENDERSTEIN



A government report in 2018 found that 11% of respondents ate their meals alone every day while another 4.3% ate alone four to five days of the week. Combined, it was a 5% increase compared to similar statistics from 2011.

LANCE HENDERSTEIN

in protein and nutrients, and low in sugar and calories—an aspect that's often cited as being behind the nation's high life expectancy. These dishes can, however, be time-consuming to prepare.

"In terms of the PFC balance, the year 1980 was excellent," says Yuji Oura, a professor at the Tokyo University of Agriculture and an expert on the eating behavior of consumers.

PFC stands for protein, fat and carbohydrates—three major nutrients that are especially essential for humans. In fact, the ideal caloric ratio of every meal is considered 15% protein, 25% fat and 60% carbohydrates.

That ratio for the Japanese weighted toward carbohydrates in 1965, but was perfectly balanced in 1980.

"That's also the year Japanese cuisine became famous around the world for its health benefits," Oura adds.

Following the collapse of the asset-price bubble in the early 1990s, however, domestic consumption became sluggish, and businesses focused on offering cheaper products that were more in line with stagnant wages. The dietary life of the Japanese has since relied substantially more on meat and fat, with less rice, and had become closer to a traditional Western-style diet by 2010.

"In the meantime, consumers, specifically the elderly, have become more health-conscious," Oura says, "and we're seeing an increase in nutritionally balanced, easy-to-prepare products for those who don't have the time or energy to cook."

A supermarket's commercial sphere in Japan typically covers a 1-kilometer radius in urban settings, and stores stock their products according to their clientele's family structures. This has resulted in an increase in smaller packages of goods—including meat, fish, fruit and vegetables—in areas with a significant portion of single-person households.

"The problem is in the countryside, where many elderly residents have abandoned their driving licenses and have no close access to retail outlets," Oura says. "It's especially prevalent among old widowers, who, under Japan's traditionally patriarchal values, never learned to properly cook for themselves. I've spoken with elderly men who subsisted on one meal a day, eating a piece of bread or a cup of noodles just to keep them moving."

Shopping refugees

The situation surrounding so-called shopping refugees, or those who don't have easy access to stores for daily necessities, has resulted in more demand for mobile supermarkets—grocery stores on wheels that deliver the shopping experience to a person's doorstep.

Tokushimaru, a subsidiary of Tokyo-based vegetable delivery service Oshis Ra Daichi, now operates over 110 light trucks in all 47 prefectures, each loaded with around 400 items sourced from local supermarkets. A typical truck serves roughly 150 customers regularly, dropping by their homes about three times a week.

Owners of the trucks receive royalties from the supermarkets they team up with, and often partake in community watch programs due to their knowledge of single, elderly households, according to Naomi Ogawa, a representative of the firm.

"Sure, there are various delivery services available, but what we hear from clients is how they often forget what they ordered, or get tired of the taste of bentos they signed up to have sent to their homes," Ogawa says. "Instead, there's a certain level of joy, no

Continued on page 11 →

