

*Fune Ni Miru Nihonjin Iminshi: Kasato Maru kara kuruzu kyakusen e*  
[“Japanese Emigration History As Seen Through Ships:  
From the *Kasato Maru* to Passenger Cruisers”]

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## Article 14

### **Voyage of the *La Plata Maru*: Part 1: Meals On Board**

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#### **Departing Kobe for the New World in Brazil**

The scene of emigrant ships departing for South America from the Kobe wharf was a drama overflowing with grief. For the emigrants leaving for faraway Brazil, it represented the end of their life in their mother country.

The fanfare of ships departing amid five-color streamers during the peak period of regular passenger routes had an atmosphere of festivity mixed with the emotions associated with departure and separation. However, the departure scene of emigrant ships was a unique world, dominated by sorrow and reminders of a life being left behind. I frequently saw South American emigrant ships after the war departing from Yokohama Harbor (which was the last port in Japan that ships left from after the war.) The sight of children and youth people with a full life ahead of them and grief-stricken elderly emigrants left me with an ache in my heart. It was a moving scene so different from the bland emotionless contemporary scene of cruise ships leaving port.

In honor of the departing emigrants, a band would march on the wharf. In *Sobo* (a novel by Tatsuzo Ishikawa) there is a scene where a group of schoolchildren sing with a band: "Go countrymen over the sea to southern lands, to Brazil." There were a number of songs written for departing emigrants and this particular song, whose writer and composer are unknown, was called "A Farewell Song For Emigrants." The words for the entire song are given below:

1. Go, go countrymen, over the sea to faraway South American Brazil  
Today's courageous departure radiates the light of our nation  
Banzai! Banzai! Ban Banzai!
2. Go, go countrymen, over the sea to southern lands, to Brazil  
Open up untapped wealth, our valiant pioneers  
Banzai! Banzai! Ban Banzai!

Most of the South American emigrant ships left in the afternoon. The next stop from Kobe for ships of the *Santos Maru* class was Hong Kong and for ships of the *Hawaii Maru* class it was Nagasaki. NYK ships stopped at Moji.

While NYK ships stopped in Moji to get coal, OSK's *Hawaii Maru* and *Manila Maru* picked up a considerable number of emigrants at Nagasaki. According to early Showa Period records, about 2,500 emigrants a year left from Nagasaki. The two ships stopped at Nagasaki about four or five times a year. OSK ships, however, stopped going to Nagasaki in March of 1930.

Even before then, OSK's South American emigrant ships left from Nagasaki instead of Kobe in 1918 because of an outbreak of cerebrospinal meningitis.

### **Warnings Outlined in *On-Board Rules***

The peak emigration to Brazil took place in the first ten years of the Show Period (1926-1989). *Sobo* is a convenient reference for getting a glimpse of conditions on the voyage to Brazil during that time, but we must keep in mind that it is merely a fictional account even though it is based on actual happenings.

The following is my attempt to recreate the emigrant sea voyage during the early Showa Period using *Sobo* and a wide range of historical materials as reference.

Close by is a guide published by Kaigai Kogyo in 1936. Entitled *Conditions of South American Brazil with Voyage Guide*, this pamphlet was distributed to emigrants before they departed. In the "Voyage Guide" section there was a set of warnings under the title "Onboard Rules." Despite its length, I introduce it in its entirety since it gives us an idea of the issues that arose during the voyage.

During the long period of time living onboard, which can range from 44 to 56 or 57 days, because you are unaccustomed to sea travel and also because we will pass through tropical regions, much care must be taken with hygiene. We serve boiled barley and rice to prevent beriberi and for your health and you should not complain. You need to be especially careful regarding gastrointestinal disorders that arise from lack of exercise, *kyakki* (?), contagious diseases from ports-of-call, and children's measles. Make an effort to keep regular habits, get enough exercise, keep good hygiene, and refrain from excessive eating and drinking. At ports-of-call, avoid buying food or drink. Be also careful about your dress and behavior so as to not invite the ridicule of foreigners. A transport supervisor and his assistant will be onboard. Consequently, for your comfort on the voyage, we need everyone's cooperation in following the instructions of the supervisor and the ship's crew. During the voyage, there will be primary school classes, language lessons, sports competitions, variety shows, an equator crossing ceremony, and other activities. Further, since

you will be able to go sightseeing at ports-of-call, the long voyage will seem to end in a matter of days.

In any case, it was a long voyage for the emigrants who had never been on a ship before. From this document, we can see just how much the emigration companies and ships' crews took pains to see that the trip was safe.

As mentioned, a transport supervisor and his assistant representing the emigration company accompanied the emigrants. These two representatives and the ship's crew were responsible for the supervision of the transport of the emigrants. Since the ships carried a few hundred people, it was a small society in itself and many meetings were necessary for smooth operation.

First, as an orientation to the voyage, a household-head meeting was held right after leaving port. At the meeting, the officers below the captain, the supervisor, and assistant supervisor were introduced and gave speeches. Also, the ship's doctor described matters related to medical treatment onboard and the administrative staff gave cautionary advice regarding life onboard. This included instructions on how to use the toilets, the schedule for bathing and using the laundry room, and drinking water conservation procedures.

### **Emigrant Supervision by the Onboard Self-Governing Body**

The emigration transport supervisor next put together an onboard self-governing body (*Sennai Jichi Dan*) to effectively administer the small floating society.

The room leaders (called *kumicho*) and assistant room leaders from each steerage compartment comprised the core of the self-governing body. The selection process for this government seemed to have been accommodated to each particular situation. In *Sobo*, members were designated at the household-head meeting. After the war, the body was called the Onboard Self-Governing Committee (*Sennai Jichi Han*). This body was formed during the time that the emigrants stayed at the emigrant placement center.

Additionally, a Youth Group (*Seinendan*) and Women's Auxiliary (*Fujinkai*) was established to be work details. Officers of these organizations below the president were elected. There were several positions in the youth group



Emigrants in "silkworm shelf" bunkbeds. Photo from a post-war South American emigrant ship.

to which people were assigned. These were the contact officer, sports officer, variety show officer, education officer, onboard newspaper officer, hygiene officer, public morals officer, surveillance officer, and meal service officer.

After the war, the following “committees” were under the onboard self-governing committee: planning and contact committee, education committee, newspaper committee, sports committee, recreation committee, public morals committee and hygiene committee, and infirmary duty committee. This structure was basically the same as the pre-war structure with the exception of the infirmary duty committee.

The room leaders and their assistants and the officers of the Youth Group and Women’s Auxiliary held meetings every morning. At plenary meetings, aside from the supervisor and his assistant, members of the crew sometimes attended when it was necessary to convey information. Also, a mimeographed onboard newspaper was distributed as a means of disseminating information to everyone.

A group photograph entitled “March 1933 Commemorative Photograph of the Santos Village Officers” shows the members of the *Santos Maru*’s Onboard Self-Governing Body when the ship arrived in Brazil in March 1933. In the front row are the officers of the Women’s Auxiliary. The ship’s crew (officers) are in the second row and behind them are the Youth Group’s officers with armbands on their left arms signifying the office they held.

On OSK ships, the self-governing body’s events were held in the special third class cafeteria. On NYK ships, which had no individual rooms, events were probably held in the large *tatami*-covered resting room or above the hatch covers. It was no doubt the worst setting because of the bad lighting and noise from the emigrants going about their daily lives. Because the decrepit NYK fleet made it difficult to administer to the needs of the emigrants, there was no other recourse than to eventually disband it in the new age of Brazilian emigrant transport.

### **Three Meals a Day Add Spice to the Voyage**

The three allures of modern cruise ships are dining, entertainment, and sightseeing at ports-of-call. Although leisure cruise ships and emigrant ships, which carried humans as if they were cargo, are as different as day and night, since olden days dining, entertainment, and sightseeing were important even for emigrant ships. For the emigrants, three meals a day were the spice of life that kept their minds away from the monotony of the voyage.

In order to recreate the voyage to South America, I will start by describing the meals on the ship. Usually, breakfast was served at 8:00 am, lunch at noon, and dinner at 5:00 pm. The emigrants were summoned to meals by a gong. Because the emigrants had to eat in two or three shifts, the mealtimes were stretched out. As mentioned, the cafeteria was above the hatch in steerage.

The meals were almost completely a self-service affair. The “boy” in charge of the table brought a container of rice, a large pot of soup, side dishes, and large bowls filled with pickled vegetables or *tsukudani* (delicacies boiled in soy sauce). Each person got his or her own utensils from a shelf and sat down to eat. Each room was assigned turns to assist in meal preparations and clean up. Since the emigrants looked forward to meals, the kitchen staff had to take great pains to cater to them. If the chief cook was enthusiastic about his job, he would conscientiously look in the slop buckets to determine the tastes of the emigrants. However, despite such painstaking efforts by the kitchen staff, it has been the general opinion that the meals onboard emigrant ships were frugal.

In "The First Brazilian Emigrants on the *Kasato Maru*" (No. 6), I talked about the meager meals of boiled barley and rice with fish, pickled vegetables, and, occasionally *miso* soup on the first Brazilian emigrant ship, the *Kasato Maru*, which sailed in the early days of Meiji. I also mentioned the menu at the Kobe Emigrant Center, which was particularly bad during the peak of emigration to Brazil. It is natural to assume that meals on emigrant ships to be similar.

In fact, the following description of a dialog between a rich husband and his wife can be found in *Sobo*:

With knitted eyebrows she put her mouth to her husband's ear and said, "I don't know if I can take this food until the 15<sup>th</sup>. Can't we pay to get some other food?" Mr. Mashita (?) seemed to have already prepared himself for the worst as he replied "The food on the ship will be worse. It will be boiled Barley and rice."

The following description of the first dinner after leaving Kobe also appears in *Sobo*:

At 5:00 p.m., the first meal began in all the rooms. In the center of each room there was a large hatch hole. A board was used to cover the hole. Tables were arranged on this cover and wooden benches placed along them for people sit on. This was the cafeteria. The passengers in each room were divided into three groups to eat in shifts. The meal consisted of a slice of salted fish, a clump of spinach, and boiled barley and rice.

The menu was simple and consisted of boiled barley and rice with two side dishes. Akasaka Masashi of Shosen Mitsui Passenger Lines, the successor of OSK, does talk about the meals on emigration ships in "The History of Emigration Transport on the Japan-South American East Coast Route" (in *Immigration Studies*, No. 10, Published by Kaigai Iju Jigyodan, 1974). However, in regard to pre-war emigration, he merely refers to a passage from *Sobo*.

## Unexpectedly Good Meals on Emigrant Ships

The crux of the matter is that it became accepted as historical fact that meals on pre-war emigrant ships were terrible and my own view originally fit this view. However, while researching for this article, I was left with an impression that is quite the opposite from what is found in *Sobo*: it seems that emigrants' meals were quite tolerable.

Table 1 shows the menus for emigrants on the South American East Coast route. Since this was in an often-referenced Japanese Foreign Ministry Commerce Bureau publication entitled "Emigrant Transport Research" (1930) and was based on a report to the government, it is probably more or less reliable. The menus are from OSK's *Montevideo Maru* and NYK's *Kanagawa Maru*. The time period is during the early Showa period, which is the same for *Sobo*. Both are examples taken from actual transoceanic voyages.

The assessment of the meals was, of course, a matter of subjective opinion, but what kind of impressions would readers get from these menus?



Emigrants at meal time. This is a photo of a post-war South American emigrant ship. On pre-war OSK ships, the tables were longer and sat more people.

My opinion from looking at the menus is that they were typical of the era's middle class households. Moreover, the emigrants were likely to be farmers who barely made a living in their home villages and whose meals had been frugal.

The onboard meals consisted of Japanese food and featured simple dishes and pickled vegetables. Nutritionally speaking, they were balanced meals. The staple was a boiled mix of one-fifth barley and four-fifths rice. This combination was served to prevent

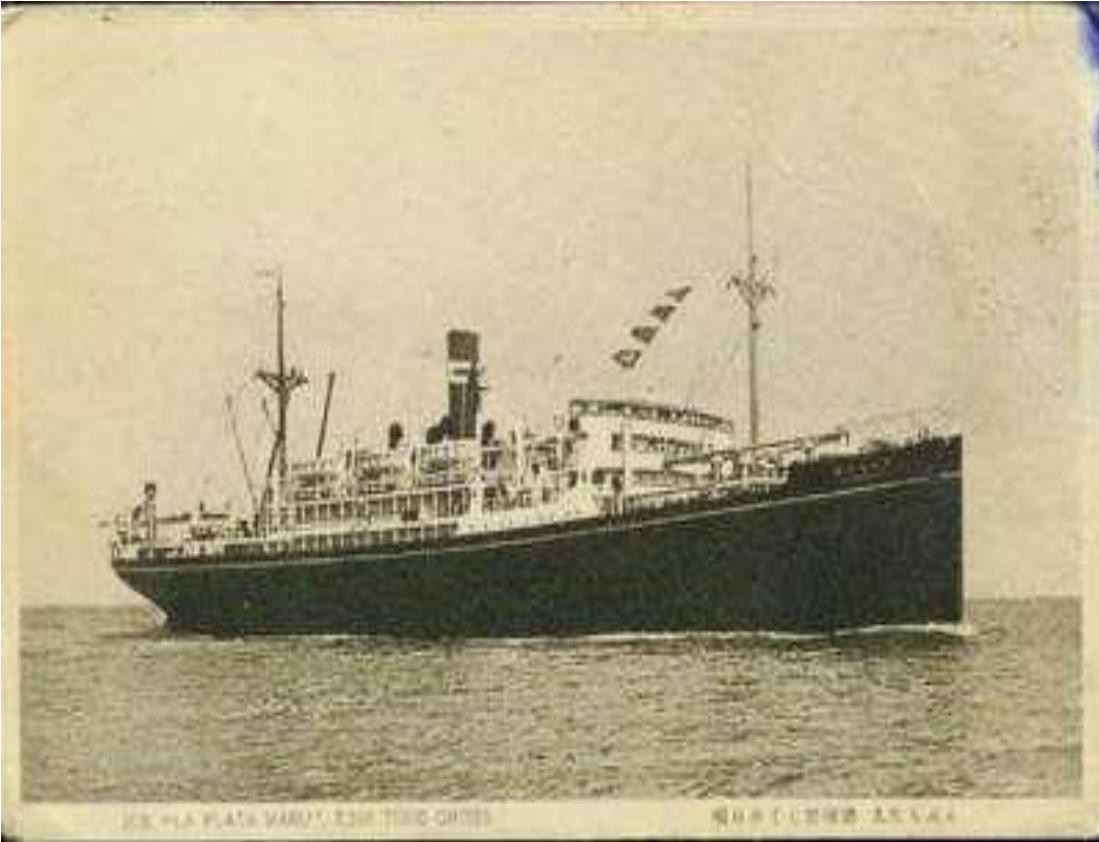
beriberi. In any case, however, people in the olden days ate a lot of rice. Incidentally, the staple on post-war emigrant ships was boiled rice.

The cooking staff on the ships created food supply manuals to prevent the volume and quality of the meals from being different from voyage to voyage. Table 2 is an example from such a manual. From this example we get a glimpse of just how much the ship's staff was concerned with the emigrants' meals.

The menus also leaves an impression that the cooking staff avoided repeating menus by paying attention to such details as preparing creative Japanese side dishes and using the bowls for a variety of dishes. For the emigrants, the ship's meals were the last opportunity to enjoy the taste of their motherland. The staff, who kept in touch with the feelings of the emigrants, did its best within the limitations it faced.

A culinary researcher who manages a school for chefs talks about a similar impression she gets from looking at the menus. She says, "These meals must have been a great comfort to the lonely hearts of the people emigrating." Brazilian-Japanese painter Manabu Manabe, who emigrated with his family in 1934, wrote about his impression of the meals in his memoirs that appeared in a *Nihon Keizei* Newspaper column entitled "My Resume." (12/4/93)

Meals were also something we looked forward to. We were summoned with a gong that was similar to those used at educational institutions. When it was time, it went "*jaan*." Probably for sanitation reasons, no fish was bought at ports-of-call and there were a lot of dishes using pickled mackerel. The *zenzai* (sugared bean soup with rice cakes) we had for snacks was sweet and tasty.



The ship that Mr. Manabe was talking about was the *La Plata Maru*, which was also the ship in *Sobo*.

Unlike in the age of *dekasegi* (sojourner) voyages in the Meiji and Taisho Periods, the Brazilian emigrants traveled in family units and thus represented genuine emigration. Further, because the government backed emigration, the attitude by the shipping companies was much improved from the earlier days.

So why did Ishikawa make it a point to portray the ship's meals in *Sobo* as being frugal?

Although I cannot be certain, the following may be a plausible explanation. First, boiled barley and rice was associated with poverty. For people in those days, the difference between boiled barley with rice as opposed to just boiled rice was large. The excerpt from *Sobo* between a man and his wife talking about food is a good example of the difference. In the conversation, the wife tells her husband "The food on the ship will be worse because it'll be boiled barley and rice." The "Onboard Rules" also reinforced this image by warning that "Boiled barley and rice would be served onboard ... Please do not complain."

Another reason may have been that the novel was a work of fiction. *Sohboh's* tone was greatly influenced by its intent to provide social criticism with a grim portrayal of the



conditions of the emigrants. Consequently, we can assume that the description of the onboard meals was also part of the social criticism. *Sohboh*, was not documentary.

## **Meals on South American Emigration Ships After World War II**

Leaving the topic of the emigrants' meals, I would like to discuss the meals of the upper class passengers.

First class passengers were served Western food. Special third class passengers (on OSK ships only) were served Japanese meals as were the emigrants, but had their own cafeteria.

However, if a third class passenger really wanted Western food, he or she could enjoy the same kind of food similar to what was served in first class for an extra 1 *yen* and 50 *sen* per day. Since at the time the store on the ship sold beer for 45 *sen* and caramel for 20 *sen*, 1 *yen* and 50 *sen* was a reasonable price. However, because that person would have to eat the meal at the same table as his or her fellow third class passengers, the situation was probably awkward unless he or she were a (non-Japanese) foreigner.

The next topic I would like to introduce is the meals on South American emigrant ships after World War II. Table 3 shows the menu for emigrants on OSK and Royal International Lines (RIL). It is a little known fact that the Dutch company RIL carried Japanese emigrants to South America side-by-side with Osaka Shosen (OSK).

The OSK menu was for dinner on the *Brazil Maru* right after it left Kobe. As it was a meal on the first day out of port, it was somewhat of a feast that included *sekihan* (rice and red beans) and broiled sea bream.

The RIL menu was for the meal on the day before and on the day of the departure. RIL ships were staffed with a Japanese cooking staff and the special cafeteria for third class passengers was well liked by the emigrants. It is said that many people on the cooking staff were from Okinawa.

Incidentally, the meals on OSK's South American emigrant ships after the war had a reputation of being good. These meals followed the tradition that started before the war. I myself have experienced the taste of this great cooking tradition on local voyages on Shosen Mitsui passenger ships, which inherited it from its predecessor OSK.

## **The Storage of Food Supplies on Emigrant Ships**

What kinds of food supplies were loaded onto emigrant ships?

There were some basic rules in regards to food supplies that I must mention. Under the "Maritime Inspection Regulations" (*Senpaku Kensa Kitei*) enacted during Meiji, the

following was stipulated for food and drinking water supplies on all emigrant ships including those going to South America.

The Type B Maritime Inspection Certificate (author's notes: Emigration Ship Inspection Certificate) should be displayed on the emigration ship. In accordance with the number of passengers and the estimated travel time from a port in Japan to the port of destination in a foreign country, Table 6 should be followed in preparing food supplies and drinking water. (Article 91)

The contents of "Table 6" are listed below. The figures are for minimum requirements for one person per day.

White rice: 5 *go* (0.9 liters)  
Meat (or poultry or fish): 5 *monme* (188 grams)  
Vegetables: appropriate amount  
*Miso, shoyu*, salt, sugar, and vinegar: appropriate amount  
Drinking water: 2 *sho* (3.6 liters)

The proportions remained the same in the Showa Period. In "Table for Food and Drinking Water for Emigration Ships" in *Maritime Facilities Regulations* from the Showa Period, the quantities are listed in Western measurements and the required quantity of fish was listed was double that for meat. Aside from these changes, however, the actual quantities of food and drinking water remained the same as in Table 6.

In any case, boiled rice remained the main food item. The amount of vegetables and other items required was an "appropriate amount" or whatever was available. If this rule were followed, however, the sumptuous meals described earlier would not have been possible.

Actually, when South American emigrant ships departed from Japan, a variety of food supplies were loaded. Table 4 illustrates this point. It is a report from the OSK ship *Montevideo Maru*. In addition to what was loaded, each ship would procure large quantities of meat, fish, vegetables and other food supplies as well as drinking water at the ports-of-call they went to after Hong Kong.

## **Onboard Stores: Items Sold and Management Style**

Having more or less discussed the onboard meals in detail, I now move on to the stores on the emigrant ships. The stores, which were directly managed by the emigration companies, sold food, drinks, and everyday-use goods.

Table 5 shows the prices of goods sold at the store on NYK's *Bingo Maru* from 1928. The prices are actually comparatively low.

From the table, one can see that many of the items sold were soft drinks, alcoholic beverages, and sweets. I have already mentioned that eating and drinking were important diversions for the emigrants. Items on the list, such as Japanese style beef stew and canned *sazae* (turban shell) were more than supplements to meals; they were food to eat while drinking alcoholic beverages. Incidentally, although it didn't happen daily, 3 o'clock snacks were served by the ship.

Since most of the voyage was a battle against extreme heat, soft drinks were especially popular. The appearance of such goods as bath soap and laundry soap on the list seem to indicate that they were not supplied in the washrooms and laundry rooms. Other items such as buckets and washbasins were also not provided in sufficient amounts.

The following description is included under the title "Carry-on Items" in the already mention Voyage Guide.

Since the ship gets wet, it is desirable to have at least one pair of rubber-soled slippers, leather-soled slippers, or rubber shoes. A water jug, bucket, wash basin, and an aluminum or enameled container for boiling water will be needed on the ship. Further, it is also advantageous to prepare enough *umeboshi* (salted and pickled plums) *shiokonbu* (salted seaweed), sugar, and long-lasting snacks for children (e.g. dried candy, biscuits, drops, etc.). There is also a store on board.

The reason why the stores were managed directly by the emigration companies is explained here.



Kanagawa Maru

During the Meiji and Taisho Periods, there were many emigrant ships that had stores whose management was entrusted to the ship's crew. There was an unending stream of reports that these stores were exacting unscrupulous profits by selling inferior and unsanitary goods to the emigrants at exorbitant prices. Especially unprincipled crewmen would purposely reduce the quality and volume of the meals or serve dinner at three o'clock to cause the emigrants to get hungry before they went to bed in order to sell more food and drinks.

The practices of inducing the emigrants to squander their meager savings by ostentatiously displaying food, drinks and everyday-use goods to encourage spending were in themselves unethical, but they were also health issues and a cause of illness. True to form, OSK and NYK realized these abuses and directly took over the stores and strictly prohibited crews from selling goods.

## Sample Steerage menus

Translated by Richard Nishioka and Mitsuko Okimoto

### Table 1a:

*MONTEVIDEO MARU* (OSK line): Sample menu - eastbound voyages\*

#### Breakfast

- (1) Dried fish, grated radish, frozen tofu “stew”, *miso* soup (tofu, green onion), pickled (Japanese) radish (daikon), *ume* [preserved Japanese plum], steamed wheat/rice
  - (2) Cooked quail beans, kelp cooked in seasoned soy sauce, Chinese cabbage with sesame seed dressing, *miso* soup (fried tofu, brown algae), pickled radish, (*ume*), steamed wheat/rice
  - (3) Fried salted salmon, turnip in vinegar sauce, kelp/fried tofu cooked in sweetened soy sauce, *miso* soup (cabbage), pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
- 

#### Lunch

- (1) Broiled fresh fish, Chinese cabbage in sesame dressing, long strips of dried radish (*sengiridaikon*) cooked in soy sauce, clear soup (fish cake, green onion), pickled radish, pickled ginger root, steamed wheat/rice
  - (2) Fish cooked in soy sauce, cooked stripped and dried radish, cucumber in vinegar sauce, pork soup, pickled radish, pickled scallion, steamed wheat/rice
  - (3) Fresh fish with sliced cucumber, green onion in *miso* sauce, cooked sweet potato, soup (Chinese cabbage, fine noodles [*soumen*]), pickled radish, pickled scallion, steamed wheat/rice
- 

#### Dinner

- (1) Beef stew, eggplant in sesame seed sauce, clear soup (sliced fish, green onion), pickled radish, pickled ginger root, steamed wheat/rice
- (2) Beef (cooked in various ways), broiled tofu, cooked green onion, stew made with long strips of gourd (*kampyo*), soup (course noodles [*udon*], Chinese cabbage) pickled radish, pickled ginger root, steamed wheat/rice
- (1) Beef cutlet with assorted vegetables, kelp in vinegar sauce, *miso* soup (sliced fish, green onion), pickled radish, pickled ginger root, steamed wheat/rice

**Table 1b**

*KANAGAWA MARU* (NYK line)

Sample menu - eastbound voyages\*

Breakfast

- (1) Dried sardine, lotus root cooked Korean style, *miso* soup (radish, fried tofu), pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
  - (2) Small salmonid (*ayu*) cooked in sweet sauce, wakame (brown algae)/ fried tofu in vinegar sauce, *miso* soup (ground soy beans, green onion), pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
  - (3) Quail bean cooked in sweet sauce, salted salmon, dried squid in sweet sauce, *miso* soup (radish, fried tofu), pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
- 

Lunch

- (1) Tuna teriyaki, grated radish, bamboo shoots cooked in sweet sauce, pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
  - (2) Broiled salted baby herring, preserved turnip, pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
  - (3) Thick fried scrambled eggs, burdock root with tofu, pickled radish, pickled ginger root, steamed wheat/rice
- 

Dinner

- (1) Beef cooked with Chinese cabbage in sweetened soy sauce, soup broth made with fish bones, pickled radish, *ume*, rice cooked with azuki beans
- (2) Fried buckwheat noodles with beef, clear broth (Sea bream, kelp), pickled radish, *ume*, steamed wheat/rice
- (3) Beef curry, clear broth (sliced fish, Chinese cabbage), preserved radish, vegetable preserved in *miso* sauce, steamed rice with chopped vegetables