



How Convenient!

A very common question that I am asked by people visiting my home/workshop is "What do you do for meals? Do you cook?" I think if I were living here with a partner they wouldn't ask this, but given that I live alone, I suppose it is fair game. My answer has changed over the years - especially since the days when I lived here with my two daughters - but these days it is simple; I just shrug my shoulders and reply that I am living a 'konbini raifu.'

If the interlocutor is fairly young, they understand this instantly, and we move on to other topics. But when the question is posed by somebody older, perhaps around my own age, and especially if it is a woman, they are usually visibly disappointed. They perhaps wanted to hear about my wonderful cooking skills, instead of the fact that I get my daily food from the convenience store (known here as a 'konbini'), typically the neighbourhood 7-11.

Well although I can perhaps understand their disappointment, I myself feel no embarrassment about buying my dinner at the convenience store, at least not these days. That kind of business has been transformed in recent years, and the days of finding nothing more than cup noodles in such a place are long gone.

Just for one example, the quantity of vegetables I eat these days has massively increased compared to when I shopped at the supermarket. The 7-11 has a wide array of ready-made salads, and my favourite among the current seasonal offerings is their '16-ingredient Salad'. There are vegetables in there that I have never even heard of before! And lest you worry that these ingredients are not fresh, I can mention that the 'sell by' dates are not *dates*, but times. The system in place at the checkout recognizes the age of each food item, and if it is within two hours of the sell by time (this is two hours *before*, not after), the register refuses to allow the sale to go through, and the clerk runs to select a replacement item, tossing the rejected one onto the shelf behind him.

When I protested one day about this waste, the manager told me not to worry - these items would find their way to a local pig farm later in the day. The four-legged connoisseurs would be waiting for *their* daily green treat!

Speaking of the checkout reminds me that the cash registers at the 7-11 are really very gabby these days too. When that 'old' salad passed under the checkout wand, it was a voice alert that told both the clerk and I about the sell by problem. And if there is a can of beer in my basket - not a rare occurrence in mid summer! - it speaks out in a computerized voice when this is scanned. "ID confirmation is required for this item."

This is an excuse for fun sometimes. Just yesterday when I was in there the girl at the checkout was wearing a name tag that identified her as being a trainee, and the store manager was hovering just behind, making sure that everything went smoothly. As my can of beer passed across the scanner, and we all heard the voice prompt for ID, she glanced at me - me with my long white beard and grey hair - and then moved to pick up the next item.

But I couldn't resist. "Aren't you going to ask for my identification?" (Said of course with a huge smile, and a wink towards the manager, whom I know well.) The girl seemed flustered for just the tiniest second, as she

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turned to the manager for guidance. Now if I were the manager, I would have retorted - also with a smile - "OK, please show us some confirmation of your age ..." But she just laughed me off.

As we finished up the purchase, I said something to the effect that it might be a good idea if they asked everybody for ID. Surely, nobody would complain about being mistaken for somebody much younger, would they? But I suppose none of these things will matter quite soon now. The next generation of cash register will size me up as I approach, and will not only detect that I am old enough to purchase a can of beer, it'll probably start recommending other products too.

Hair dye maybe?

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