

'Gyudon' return sets off stampede to Yoshinoya

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Fans of Yoshinoya's beef bowls thronged the fast-food chain Monday to get their first taste of the popular dish in more than 2 1/2 years since it was scratched from the menu due to the ban on U.S. beef.

The "gyudon" creation of shaved beef on rice is Yoshinoya D&C Co.'s signature dish. Monday's cattle call was just a one-day promotion to whet customers' appetites before the item returns in full force in December. About 1 million servings were offered Monday at its 1,000 outlets across Japan.

Due to limited supplies, however, Yoshinoya plans to serve beef bowls full time only at the Tsukiji outlet in Tokyo, starting Tuesday. Another one-day campaign is planned at its 20 outlets in Hokkaido on Thursday, while two more nationwide campaigns lasting five days each are planned at the beginning of October and November.

The ban on U.S. beef was lifted in July.

Yoshinoya President Shuji Abe told reporters he believes he made the right choice by limiting his main ingredient to just U.S. beef instead of caving in and using the Australian product. He has repeatedly said the taste of American beef is better suited for gyudon.

As for safety, Abe said: "I cannot do anything to erase the public's concern over U.S. beef. But I can explain with 100 percent confidence why they are safe."

Abe said he has confidence in U.S. inspection procedures and that the bilateral agreement, which restricts beef imports to cattle 20 months or younger, is too strict.

While many Japanese consumers still doubt the safety of U.S. beef,

the fans lining up at Yoshinoya were unfazed.

"It was delicious," said Tadashi Ishigami, 23, one of the first to mark the return of the dish, downing a bowl at an outlet in Tokyo's Yurakucho district. "I don't care (about the safety of the beef) as long as I can eat it."

Yukiko Sugimoto, 24, a resident of Bunkyo Ward, said she feels U.S. beef is safe because she has confidence in the inspections the two governments are carrying out.

"I'm optimistic," she said.

Neal Morris, 34, a traveler from New Orleans who happened to be passing by the Yurakucho shop, said he was glad U.S. beef is available again.

Asked if he thought Japanese were overreacting, he said: "It is reasonable for the Japanese to be safety conscious for their food. So I don't think the Japanese are overly concerned."

The government gave the green light to U.S. beef after Japanese officials inspected export-authorized meatpackers in the U.S. and said regulations agreed upon by the two countries were being strictly observed.

The ban on American beef was initially lifted in December but reimposed in January after spinal bones were found in a shipment of veal. The error was traced to U.S. plant workers and a government inspector who didn't realize veal cuts with backbone, accepted in the U.S., are considered a risk for mad cow disease in Japan.

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