Bento: Packaging Good Food and Human Warmth

One of the pleasures of eating bento is the excitement, upon opening the box, of seeing what is inside. The person who makes the bento, too, enjoys giving thought to the process of creating a boxed meal that will please the person eating it. A bento can be a very eloquent medium of messages between people who care for each other.

Bento Times

Bento are boxed meals packed in an attractive manner in easily portable containers. For everyone living in Japan, from early childhood onward, bento are a familiar and ordinary style of eating.

Day care and kindergarten
Many children have a bento弁当 set of their own for the first time when they enter kindergarten or day care.

Elementary and junior high school
Most elementary and junior high schools in Japan serve school lunches every day, but several times a year, for special school events such as field trips and sports events, the students take bento.

The sight and sounds of a parent who has risen early to prepare a bento, the good taste of its contents, and the fun of sharing bento tidbits with friends are among many people’s happy memories.

Junior high students also often have bento made for them when they go to school on weekends or holidays for club activities or for their quick evening meal between school and attending juku.

Various cute bento! These were made by the first-year students at a junior high school in Tokyo on “bento day.”
Our favorite okazu dishes for bento
The most popular okazu (main and additional side dishes) taste good even when cold and go well with rice. People often have special memories of the taste of such okazu made by a particular person or the occasion when they ate it in a bento.

Q: What is your favorite okazu?

1st place: tamagoyaki (rolled egg)
2nd place: kara-age (deep-fried chicken morsels)
3rd place: unna (wieners)
4th place: shio-zake (salted salmon)


High school
Few high schools serve school lunches or have cafeterias. Students either bring a homemade bento or they may buy sandwiches or bento at a shop near or temporarily open at the school.

At workplaces
Some working people bring homemade bento for lunch. Others buy commercially made bento at a nearby convenience store, have it warmed up at the store, and eat it at the office.

Home delivery for the elderly
Shopping and cooking meals daily can be a difficult burden for the elderly, and some make use of services that deliver bento to their door. They look forward to the contact with the person who delivers the bento and can request special menus if they have specific needs, such as limited calorie intake or low-sodium foods.

Pleasure outings
A good picnic bento is indispensable when it comes to seasonal outings—a celebration of spring under the cherry blossoms, a trip to the beach, or a picnic to enjoy the colors of autumn. The bento brought together on such occasions, often packed in large, picnic-style containers for sharing among several people, augment the pleasures and excite the conversations when families or groups of friends gather. When traveling, some people enjoy buying locally made bento (ekiben) at stops along the way.

Time- and energy-saving meal
Some people buy bento in the evening on the way home, either for themselves or family members. When tired out and hungry after a long day, some people opt for a bento instead of trying to make a proper homemade meal. Bento contain a variety of foods and are cheaper than eating out. Bento are sold at convenience stores and supermarkets, as well as stores specializing in bento.
For Healthy and Colorful Bento

Almost all elementary schools and 70 percent of junior high schools serve hot lunches.* Bento day was a program that began at an elementary school in Kagawa prefecture in 2001 and has since spread throughout Japan. The school sets several days throughout the school year when school lunches will not be served and asks all the students to get up early and make their own bento, without any parental help, on those days. The students are expected to take charge of everything—from purchasing ingredients to cleaning up after their preparations. Still, the program is highly regarded for not only heightening children’s understanding of nutritional balance but fostering self-reliance, raising their awareness and sense of gratitude toward the people who prepare their meals, as well as cultivating closer ties within the family and in the local community (see “Meeting People”).

*Bento is a rank of bento, a take-out or home-packed lunch that includes a small serving of the staple food, a main side dish, and an assortment of additional side dishes. Bento is a highly revered tradition in Japan, and the preparation of bento is often seen as an act of love and care.

How to make a nutritionally balanced bento

A nutritionally balanced bento can be created easily following the “3-1-2 bento-making method.” The entire space of the bento should be divided into 6 parts and then three of those parts devoted to the staple food, 1 part to the main side dish, and 2 parts to additional side dishes.

Red okazu
- cherry tomatoes
- mentaiko (roe)

Green okazu
- salt-flavored cucumber
- broccoli

Brown okazu
- kinpira gobo (seasoned burdock)
- soboro (seasoned minced meat)

White okazu
- shumai dumplings
- boiled eggs

Yellow okazu
- gratin
- simmered kabocha squash

Staple carbohydrates: Rice, bread, pasta
Main side dishes: Dishes made largely with fish, meat, egg, or soy beans
Additional side dishes: Dishes made largely with vegetables or potatoes, seaweed products

Bento Day: Students take up the challenge

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How to make a colorful bento

Food-related magazine and website features often introduce okazu dishes for bento by color. All it takes to create a delicious-looking bento is to skillfully combine differently colored okazu.

How to make your own bento

Plan your own bento! What color categories (red, green, yellow, brown, or white) do the foods you are familiar with belong to?

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Bento Day Hints for Elementary School Students

“T he A-I-U-E-O of Bento Making”

あ is for anzen: 安全. To keep the foods from spoiling, be sure to wash the bento box carefully and cool down cooked foods before packing them. あ is also for aijo: 愛情. Food that is made with loving care tastes good. い is for irō: 彩りよく. Try to include foods of different colors. う is for uga: うがい and te-arai. Wash your hands and gargle before starting to cook. え is for eiyo: えいようバラ. nus: Choose ingredients for a good nutritional balance. お is for oishii: おいしい. Do your best to choose healthy ingredients and season them well, so that the bento will taste as good as it can.

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**Bento-making shortcuts**

Making a nutritionally balanced and colorful bento with several kinds of okazu day after day is no easy task. Experienced bento makers take advantage of various shortcuts for preparing okazu quickly.

One very common method is to prepare dishes for the evening and morning meals in slightly extra amounts and use the leftovers for bento.

Convenient frozen foods made especially for bento use are also available, such as mini hamburger steaks and deep-fried foods that can be defrosted quickly in the microwave. Frozen cooked vegetable dishes prearranged in paper cups can be placed just as they are in the bento; by lunch hour they are defrosted and ready to eat.

Many types of okazu, prepared in servings easy-to-use sizes for bento, are available among frozen food products.

**Enhancing the enjoyment of eating**

The creative touches incorporated can be greatly enhanced by utilizing various cute or attractive bento props, decorative ways of cutting okazu, and artful arrangements, all small contrivances that can be adopted in the midst of a busy daily schedule.

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**The sentiments of the bento maker**

People make bento for many reasons—to provide a healthier meal than can be purchased commercially, to save money, to be able to eat or let someone else eat foods that suit personal preferences, and even as an expression of love or care for the person the bento is made for. There are many cases of people who get up early every morning year after year, before anyone else is awake, to make bento for themselves or another family member.

In the past it was generally women who made bento for their husbands or children, but in our more recent era of gender equality, the number of men who make bento for themselves or family members has increased.

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Let’s Try!

The words below are all bento-related words. What do they mean? Pick one from a to f.

1. 早弁 hayaben 2. 駅弁 ekiben 3. 空弁 soraben 4. キャラ弁 kyaraben 5. ほか弁 hokaben 6. 塾弁 jukuben

a. locally made bento sold at airports
b. locally made bento sold at train stations
c. bento eaten when going to juku in the evening
d. eating bento before noon
e. hot, freshly-made bento purchased at a bento store
f. bento featuring the shapes of anime or other characters

The answers can be found at [http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm](http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm)
Q: What did you bring for lunch today? How long did it take you to prepare it?

Akihiro: I have teriyaki chicken, *tamagoyaki* *(rolled egg)*, and *kinpira gobo* *(seasoned burdock).*1 I woke up an hour earlier than usual to prepare it. I made everything in about thirty minutes.

Ayumi: Mine also took about thirty minutes. I have *kara-age* *(deep-fried chicken)*, *tamagoyaki*, *macaroni gratin*, and *harumaki* *(spring rolls)*. I tried to be creative with the sweet-and-spicy sauce for the fried chicken.

Issei: I made fried rice, *yakisoba* *(fried noodles)*, and soy-sauce stewed tuna. I prepared the *yakisoba* last night, but I woke up at five to make the fried rice. I also brought some leftover potato salad from dinner last night.

Momoka: I also had done some preparation last night, so I finished everything in about an hour this morning. Mine includes *chirashizushi* *(various ingredients scattered on sushi rice)*, potato cakes filled with cheese and *mentaiko* *(spicy cod roe)*, *nanohana* *(rape plant shoots)* rolled up in meat, etc.

Q: How did you feel when you were first told that you had to make your own lunch on *bento* day? How do you think you have changed over the last three years?

Ayumi: In my first year, I thought it was a bit of a drag to have to make my own lunch. But once I got started, it became more and more fun. I had never done any cooking before, so I couldn’t roll up the *tamagoyaki* properly at first—it just ended up looking like scrambled eggs. I learned how to do it properly after watching a cooking show on television. In my second year, I began to help with the cooking at home, and now I can make pretty much anything.

Issei: To be honest, at first, I didn’t understand why we had to make our own lunches. I thought about buying something already made at a *bento* store, but I thought it would be a hassle if I got in trouble for that, so I decided not to. Besides, I figured that it would taste better if I made it myself properly. Until then, the only thing that I had ever prepared by myself was cup noodles, so my parents helped me out and gave me some tips. I made a real mess, but I did it myself. After a few times, I started to understand and appreciate the effort that my parents put in preparing my meals every day. I started to feel that I, too, would like to have someone that I could prepare meals for.

Momoka: In my first and second years, I learned how to make fancy-looking *bento*, like elaborate *kyaraben* *(featuring ingredients cut to look like anime characters)*. In my third year, I concentrated more on the flavor and became good at making *bento* that taste good. I had also been practicing making *bento* within a ninety-minute time limit for the prefectural *bento* competition that I entered, so I can now produce one pretty quickly.

Q: Do you think any differently about the way you eat since taking part in the *bento* day four times?

Akihiro: They are always telling us when we plan the menu for our *bento* to keep variety and color in mind, so that has probably led me to eat more vegetables at home.

Issei: I’ve always eaten everything on my plate, so my diet hasn’t changed much. But I try to think about prepar-
Q: What is a memorable bento that someone has made for you?

**Issei:** I used to take a bento for my supper when I had late evening classes at juku. My favorite dish is my mother’s tamagoyaki. She makes it really sweet, but I make it even sweeter!

**Akihiro:** For me, it’s the ten-musu*3 that my mother made for me to take on a school trip when I was in elementary school. The shrimp was plump and juicy and the rice had soaked up the sweet and spicy sauce—it was delicious. I had tried a store-bought ten-musu once and thought it was really good. Apparently, my mother remembered my enthusiasm and made it for me. That made me really happy.

**Ayumi:** I made my bento for myself today. I thought that would be one less burden on my mother.

**Momoka:** I made my bento for my mother. I made one for myself and one for her. She has stood by me with my entrance examinations and all kinds of other things, so I made it to show my appreciation. She was very happy with it.

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**My favorites**

**Favorite color**

- **Ayumi:** Blue, because it’s the color of sky.
- **Issei:** Black, white. I always wear these colors.
- **Akihiro:** Red, because it raises your spirits.
- **Momoka:** Pink and black. All my clothes and accessories are these colors.

**Hobbies**

- **Ayumi:** バスケットボール (basketball)
- **Issei:** テニス、ダンス、ドラム (tennis, dance, drums)
- **Akihiro:** 野球、釣り (baseball, fishing)
- **Momoka:** ピアノ演奏、鉱物収集 (piano, collecting minerals)

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*1: たまごやき, tamagoyaki is eggs flavored with sugar and salt and fried in a roll by spreading a thin layer in a pan, rolling it as it cooks, and adding more egg to continue the roll.

*2: きんぴらごぼう, kinpira gobo are shavings of burdock root stir-fried with soy sauce, sake, and sugar; may be seasoned with sesame seed and spiced up with hot pepper.

*3: Rice balls with shrimp tempura inside.

*4: Thin slices of pickled ginger dyed with red food coloring.

*5: Minced meat, flavored with soy sauce and mirin, used as a topping over rice.

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Q: At your school, each bento day has a theme, and today’s was “Present bento: making lunch for someone special.” Who did you make your bento for?