

We Made Our Own *Bento*

Akihiro, Ayumi, Issei, Momoka

(Third-year junior high school students from Tokyo)

Q: What did you bring for lunch today? How long did it take you to prepare it?

Akihiro: I have teriyaki chicken, *tamagoyaki* *¹(rolled egg), and *kinpira gobo* (seasoned burdock). *² 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

Here we introduce four third-year students at a junior high school in Tokyo. Their school provides lunch every day, but it also organizes a "*bento* day" once or twice a year for which students bring boxed lunches. These third-year students have made their own *bento* lunches four times during their three years of junior high.



You can listen to their voices.

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.

All: Wow, really? Who for? Your girlfriend? You would actually do the cooking, not the other way around?!



Akihiro: For my first *bento* day, I planned the menu and asked my mother how to make everything. But I wanted to do it all by myself, so I asked her not to help me and did it alone. It wasn't my first time cooking, though. My mother works, so sometimes my sisters and I prepare our meals. In my first year, I made a really simple *noriben* (*bento* with layers of rice and *nori* seaweed) so it didn't take very long. Now, after three years, I've finally become good at making *tamagoyaki*.

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 become 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-

ing *bento* and meals that are well balanced, using not just one ingredient, but vegetables and a variety of things.

Ayumi: I have become more aware of nutritional balance ever since we learned about it in school. So now, like I'll eat grapefruit if I feel I'm not getting enough vitamin C.

Momoka: *Bento* day is our chance to get to see our friends' homemade lunches. When I see their cute *bento* I get all sorts of new ideas. I learn new tricks from them and try them myself next time.

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'm on the basketball team at school. We had all-day practice during the summer vacation, so I always took a *bento*. We had been practicing really intensely day after day in the stifling heat to prepare for an important district tournament game that was coming up. One day, I opened up my *bento* box to find that my mother had used bright red *beni-shoga**4 flakes to form the letters *がんばって* ("Fight!") on the brown *soboro gohan*.*5 It made me so happy to know that my mother was there for me. Once she also packed me a dessert of lemon slices soaked in honey. I shared it with my teammates and I'll never forget how "genki" it made us all.

Momoka: My father is an *itamae*, a chef in a Japanese-style restaurant. When I was in elementary school, he always used to bring us *chirashizushi* for *undokai* (sports day), which we would all eat as a family. I made *chirashizushi* for lunch today in memory of that. I also love the meat wrap dish that my mother makes, so I made that, too.

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?

Issei: I made my *bento* for my parents. I took my high school entrance exams this year, and they invested a lot of time and attention, not to mention money, to help me, and I thought that might be a way of saying thank you.

Ayumi: I made my *bento* for myself today.

Akihiro: I made it for myself as well. 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.



*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* is 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.

My favorites

好きな色 Favorite color

Ayumi: 青。空の色だから。
Blue, because it's the color of sky.

Issei: 黒、白。服でよく着るから。
Black, white. I always wear these colors.

Akihiro: 赤。気持ちが高ぶるから。
Red, because it raises your spirits.

Momoka: ピンク、黒。身の周りのものはみんなこの色。
Pink and black. All my clothes and accessories are these colors.

趣味 Hobbies

Ayumi: バスケット
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

Note: This article is based on an interview held on February 28, 2011.