


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.

 This mark indicates that more related information is included on the "Click Japan" website. <http://www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/>

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*.



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A child's first *bento* set.



Picnic *bento* for school excursions and field trips. The children spread sheets on the grass to eat their *bento*.

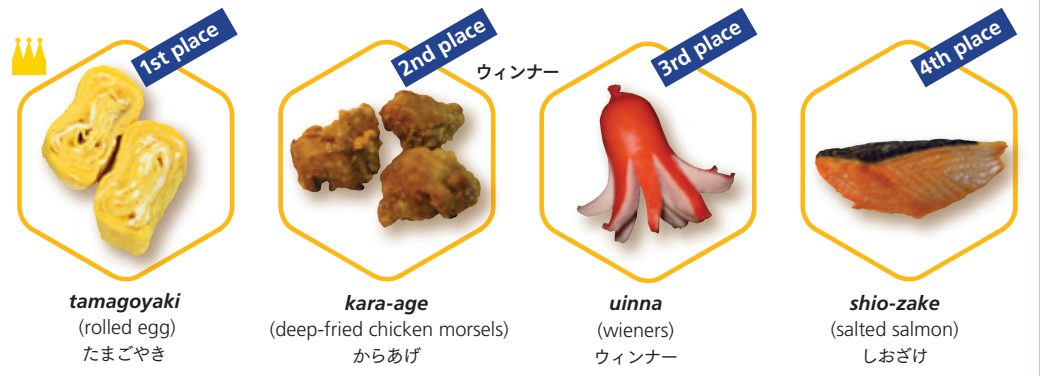


Various cute *bento*! These were made by the first-year students at a junior high school in Tokyo on "bento day."

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*?



Source: From "Chotto shiritai minna no koe: Bento", Tepore, 2005. <http://www.tepore.com/koe>

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.



Eating *bento* in the high school classroom and cafeteria.

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.



Lunch time 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.



Delivering a *bento* to an elderly man living alone.

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*.



Shopping at a *bento* store.



For Healthy and Colorful *Bento*



All *bento*, whether home made or commercially made, are attractively packed with several kinds of *okazu* dishes. Their selection and arrangement is based on considerations of nutrition, color, and variety.

In Japan the importance of eating as great a variety of foods as possible every day and maintaining a nutritionally balanced diet is widely recognized as a result of what people learn in school as well as numerous popular television programs and other media

features on health and nutrition. Not only when making a *bento* but when buying one, most people gauge the nutritional balance of the meal it offers by the color and variety of its *okazu*.

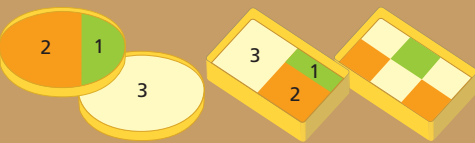
It is also well known that what makes a meal appetizing is not only aroma and flavor but appearance. People try to make *bento* with food arrangements that look delicious and arouse the appetite.

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

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.

* Recommended by Shokuseitaigaku Jissen Forum at <http://www.shokuseitaigaku.com/bentoubako/index.html>



- 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

Try packing a *bento* box in an online game.

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*.

- Red okazu**
 - cherry tomatoes ミニトマト
 - mentaiko (roe) 明太子
- Green okazu**
 - salt-flavored cucumber きゅうりのしおもみ
 - broccoli ブロッコリー
- Brown okazu**
 - kinpira gobo (seasoned burdock) きんぴらごぼう
 - soboro (seasoned minced meat) そぼろ
- White okazu**
 - gratin グラタン
 - shumai dumplings シューマイ
- Yellow okazu**
 - boiled eggs ゆでたまご
 - simmered kabocha squash かぼちゃ

Bento Day: Students take up the challenge



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").

* Nationwide average for all schools serving school lunches. "Survey on School Lunch Programs," Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2009.

Bento Day Hints for Elementary School Students

お弁当作りの「あいうえお」

あ 「あんぜん」で「あいによう」
「あんぜん」は、食中毒を防ぐために大切なことです。また、料理をよく冷ましてからつまみましょう。
「あいによう」は、食べ物を大切に、とっっても大切にしましょう。

い 「いろどりよく」
「い」にもありますが、食(かぼちゃ、卵)、油(ごま油、ごま油)、塩(しょうゆ、塩)、糖(砂糖)など、様々な食材を入れます。
自然と栄養バランスもよくなります！

う 「うがい」で「うがい」
食器を洗ったり、調理したり、お弁当をつめる前には、うがいをうがいしましょう。

え 「えいようばんそう」
「えい」にもありますが、取りよけることで、栄養のバランスがよくなります。さらに、食べ物の好きが分かれば、これも良い習慣を身に付けましょう。食べ物の好きについては、後者の親立会や保護者を対象にしてください。

お 「おいしゅう」
「おいしくなれ！」という思いをこめながらお弁当の中身を準備し、料理をよくなるがけましょう。

"The 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 *irodori yoku* 彩りよく: Try to include foods of different colors.

う is for *ugai* うがい and *te-arai* 手洗
い: Wash your hands and gargle before starting to cook.

え is for *eiyo barsansu* えいようバランス: 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.

© Utsunomiya Municipal Nishi Elementary School

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.

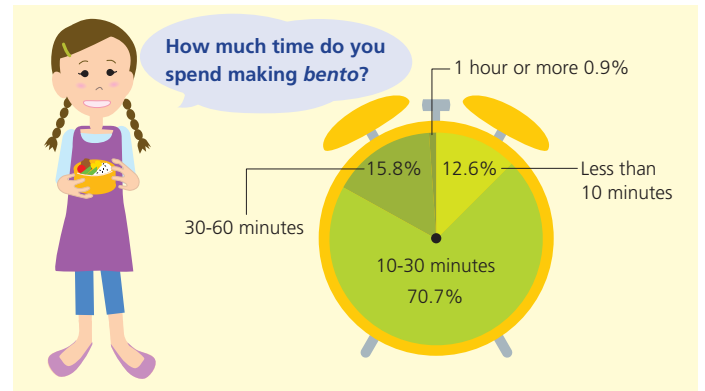
One very common method is to prepare dishes for the evening and morning meals in slightly extra amounts and use the leftovers for *bento*.

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



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

just as they are in the *bento*; by lunch hour they are defrosted and ready to eat.



Source: Survey by the OCN O-bento Club, 2011, based on responses from about 12,200 people

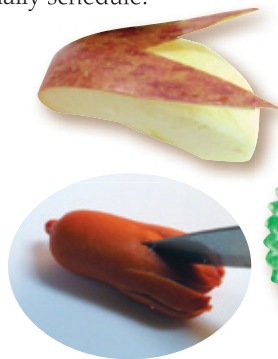
See data on the types of *okazu* used in *bento*.

Enhancing the enjoyment of eating

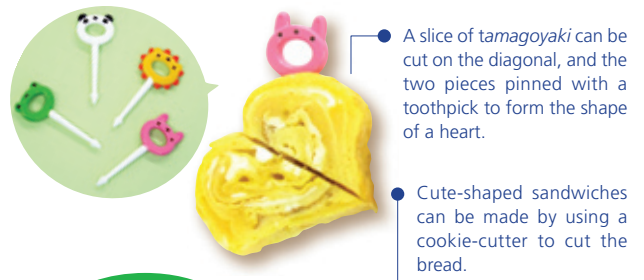
The creative touches incorporated can be greatly enhanced by utilizing various cute or attractive *bento* props, decorative ways of cutting *okazu*, and artful arrangements, all small contrivances that can be adopted in the midst of a busy daily schedule.



• *Nori* (laver) seaweed cut with a special punch gives an *onigiri* a lively expression. A drinking straw can be used to cut out small circles in a slice of ham.



• Octopus-shaped wieners and rabbit-shaped apple are some of the decorative ways *okazu* can be fashioned with a regular kitchen-knife.



• A slice of *tamagoyaki* can be cut on the diagonal, and the two pieces pinned with a toothpick to form the shape of a heart.

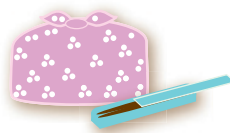
• Cute-shaped sandwiches can be made by using a cookie-cutter to cut the bread.



• These paper cups have a message inside, revealed after the contents are eaten.

Photography: Naganuma Atsuko

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.

See data on how often people make *bento* and for whom.

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>

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.