


Bento: Packaging Good Food and Human Warmth

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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.



A child's first bento set.

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*.



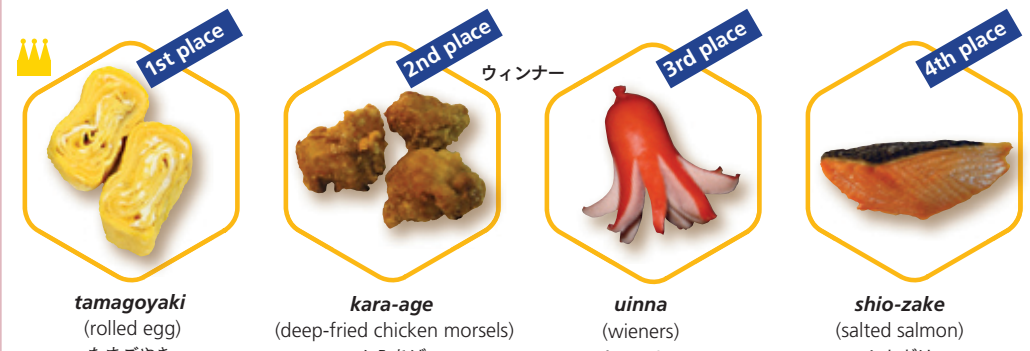
Picnic *bento* for school excursions and field trips. The children spread sheets on the grass to eat their *bento*.

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.

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.



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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.

© TJF

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.

© Waiam Takashoku Co. Ltd.

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.



© TJF

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.

© 住

For Healthy and Colorful *Bento*

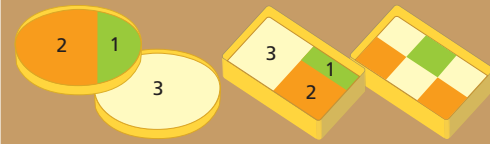
All *bento*, whether home made or commercially made, are attractively packed with several kinds of *okazu* dishes. Their selection and arrangement is based on considerations of nutrition, color, and variety.

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


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>

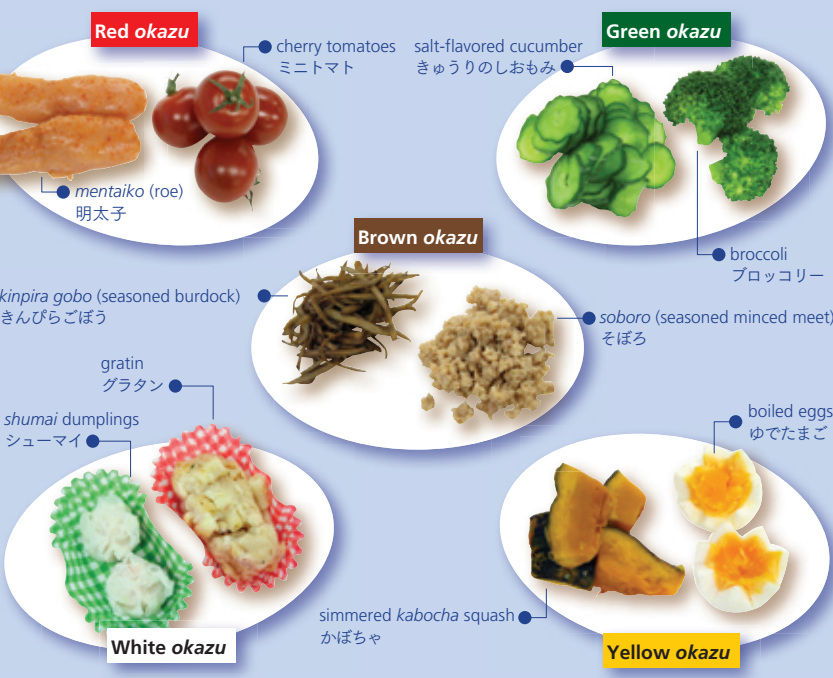


Staple carbohydrates: Rice, bread, pasta
Main side dishes: Dishes made largely with fish, meat, egg, or soy beans
Additional side dishes: Dishes made largely with vegetables or potatoes, seaweed products

 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*.



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

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.



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.

Bento Day Hints for Elementary School Students



“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 *ajio* 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 *ugui* うがい and *te-arai* 手洗い: Wash your hands and gargle before starting to cook.
え is for *eiyo baransu* えいようバランス: Choose ingredients for a good nutritional balance.
お is for *oshii* 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.

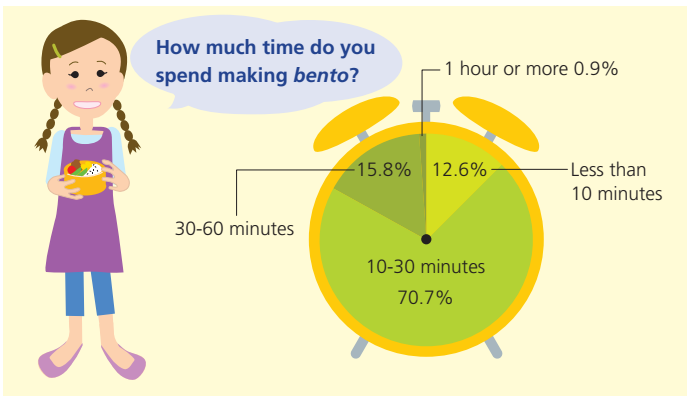
One very common method is to prepare dishes for the evening and morning meals in slightly extra amounts and use the leftovers for *bento*.

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

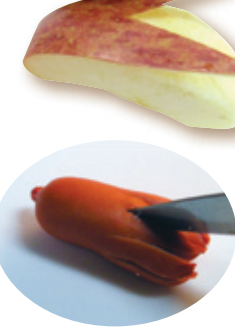
 See data on the types of *okazu* used in *bento*.

Enhancing the enjoyment of eating

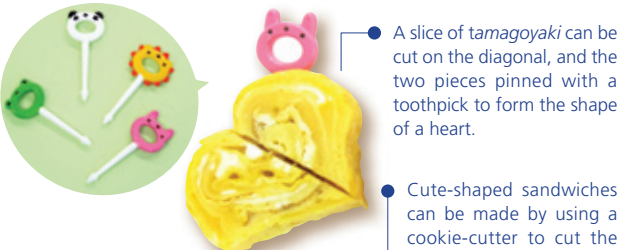
The creative touches incorporated can be greatly enhanced by utilizing various cute or attractive *bento* props, decorative ways of cutting *okazu*, and artful arrangements, all small contrivances that can be adopted in the midst of a busy daily schedule.



● *Nori* (laver) seaweed cut with a special punch gives an *origami* 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>



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