

Obento: A Bite of Tradition

By

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Abstract

When we talk about lunch boxes, a nostalgic feeling surfaces from our childhood when our mothers used to pack food wrapped with love - a tasty treat we couldn't wait to eat and share with friends during recess. However, Japanese lunch boxes, popularly known as *Bento* or *Obento* (with honorific "O"), have some features that set them apart. Japanese cuisine is known for its elaborate and scrupulous food work, where attention is not only given to taste and nutrition but to the presentation of the food as well. *Bento* is a refined exemplification of culture packed in a box, representing the perfection mixed with care and love.

I clearly remember my first day in Tokyo when I saw stacks of packed meals arranged neatly on shelves at the nearby convenience store. I couldn't help but wonder over the appeal, sophistication, and details given to each *Bento* and the creative use of colors of each ingredient that turned the meal into a piece of art. At that time, my taste buds were not ready for Japanese food; hence I savored the food through visuals, hoping to enjoy it one day. And then came *Sakura* season, the parks were packed with families, gathered to view cherry blossom under the trees, sitting on their picnic mats with special *Bento* placed abundantly in front of them, fueling my curiosity to learn more about this custom. I decided to dig deeper into *Bento* and its place in the everyday lives of Japanese people, which I am presenting in this article.

Keywords

Bento, Japanese cuisine

History

The origin of *Bento* takes us back to the 5th Century, the time when the centralized government system was on the rise and the national tax had been introduced. Locals who used to carry these taxes to the central government had to travel long distances. To survive on those journeys, they carried food with them that would not spoil easily and was lightweight such as *Hoshi-ii*, boiled and dried rice.

Later in the 15th and 16th centuries, when the Japanese army was growing bigger, and soldiers were being commissioned to different locations, to feed themselves, they usually carried rice balls, miso balls, dried fish, and pickled vegetables wrapped in a cloth called *uchigaibukuro*. At the end of 16th century Azuchi-Mamoyama period lacquered wooden boxes replaced *uchigaibukuru*. The Samurai, Oda Nobunaga, is known for bringing the term '*Bento*' into existence by distributing simple boxed meals to people stationed in his castle.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), *bento* became part of daily life. People carried Koshiben (waist bento), *bento* boxes worn around the waist for picnics, sightseeing, and travelling. Koshiben mainly consisted of several rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves. Then came *Makunouchi bento*, a type of bento that was eaten in theaters. *Makunouchi* is translated as 'between acts'; people carried it with them when they went to watch *Kabuki* performances, and enjoyed it during the intermission. The food was neatly compartmentalized in a *bento* box that often contained steamed rice, pickled plum, and vegetables along with fish.

Types of *Bento*

As we have seen earlier, *Bento* is much more than just a packed meal for Japanese people; it can be categorized based on its look, selling place, and season. Let us explore the different types of *Bento*.

Kyaraben: *Kyaraben* means Character *Bento*. These *bentos* are a piece of art crafted carefully to depict an image or a beloved character; the character could be from a movie, manga, or anime, or could be an animal. In modern Japan, *Kyaraben* became a symbol of a mother's love for her child, packed in a box, a representation of her skills and thought given

behind a meal that is visually appealing to children. For this purpose, the ingredients are selected, cooked, and arranged accordingly. National contests and online communities offer a ground for *Kyaraben* artists to come together and showcase their skills. Some of the popular *Kyaraben* are Halloween *kyaraben*, Hello Kitty *kyaraben*, or Pikachu *kyaraben*.



Image 1: Kyaraben

Ekiben: A *Bento* sold at every major and mid-size train station, and packed for long train journeys is known as *Ekiben*. It is comprised of two words, *Eki*, which means station, and *Ben* stands for *Bento*, simply meaning ‘Station Bento’. *Ekiben* gained a lot of popularity in modern Japan; it is found inside every *Shinkansen* gate; they are a must-have if you are about to travel at the speed of 180km per hour. They offer the local cuisine with the fresh ingredients grown in that province, with an emphasis on season and occasion. Most of them are packed in plastic or bamboo containers, but some special ones are packed in traditional lacquered wooden boxes, providing an authentic experience. A latest feature that is gaining popularity these days is the self-heating *Ekiben*, with the pull of one string, the meal inside the box is heated automatically.



Image 2: Ekiben

Konbini Bento: *Konbini* is a popular term used for convenience stores in Japan. Unlike other countries, Japanese *Konbini* stores offer a variety of fresh and hot meals throughout the day, ranging from basic to lavish meals. You can see many people sitting on benches in the parks and having their *bento* bought from nearby *Konbini*; most of them are the people working in the offices in that vicinity. There are several convenience stores across Japan named Lawson, Seven Eleven, or Family Mart serving healthy and hot meals. I often bought them to enjoy them with my son in the woods of *Myogadani*, my earliest residence in Japan.

Jubako: These are three or four-layered wooden lacquered ornate boxes containing *Osechi ryouri*, a small set of traditional savory that is eaten over the Japanese New Year. It is placed in the middle of a *kotatsu* table and remains there for the next three days. It is shared with friends and family; each item in the *jubako* represents a distinct wish for next year and symbolizes happiness, good fortune, and other boons. These can also be found easily at *bento* shops and in Department stores during this time of the year.



Image 3: Jubako

Koraku: *Koraku* are *bento* that you carry on a picnic. It is popularly eaten during *Hanami* (cherry blossom viewing); after a long winter in the month of March-April, when *Sakura* (cherry flowers) bloom abundantly, Japanese people come out to appreciate their beauty. For centuries, Japanese people have enjoyed this excursion with friends and family under a *Sakura* tree with a large *Koraku* Bento. *Koraku* is themed according to the season. It typically contains *onigiri* (rice balls), *karage*(fried chicken), *dango*(three or five skewered round-shaped, pink, white, and green colored sweet made with rice flour), and *Sakura mocha*(Red bean paste covered in mocha and sakura leaf).



Image 4: Koraku

Hokaben: *Hokaben* is prepared freshly upon placing an order and is customized according to your preference. It serves hot steamed rice and grilled chicken or fish, along with other local varieties. They are sold exclusively by specialty shops.



Image 5: Hokaben

Conclusion

We have seen there are many types of *bento*, but one thing that is consistent in all the *bento* boxes is that they serve a well-balanced and light meal prepared using the ingredients that work in conjunction with one another. A balanced *bento* usually follows the formula of 4-3-2-1, where carbohydrates (rice or noodles) are 4 parts, vegetables are 3 parts, protein (fish, meat, tofu, eggs) is 2 parts, and pickled vegetables, fruits, or dessert is 1 part, offering a guilt-free healthy meal.

The experience of Japanese culture is incomplete until you've had one of these Bentos.

About the Author

Neha Gupta is a Pune-based writer who has taught English, Japanese, and Yoga for years in India as well as in Japan. Her passion lies in writing poetry and stories. She has won numerous accolades for her writing over the years, including Wordsmith Awards for English

stories and poems on the prestigious Asian Literary Society platform. She has lived in Japan for eight years and has observed and learnt a lot from the culture; she likes to bring the aesthetics of Japanese culture into light through her articles.

