

A Touch of Japanese Tradition

Japanese Food

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Japanese Food
Dave Lowry

Obento
in Context
Debra Samuels

Okinawan Food
Teigan Babcock

Japanese Food
Adaptation
Linda Austin

Food Connects Us
Noriko Yuasa



Looking At - And Seeing - Japanese Food

Dave Lowry

When the meal you ate last at a Japanese restaurant was placed in front of you, what did you see?

Obviously, you saw what you had ordered: sushi, tempura, a bowl of miso soup. But did you see it?

Did you notice, for example, nigiri sushi is situated on a plate so there are no straight lines in the arrangement? Did you see how the maki-zushi rolls are stacked so they slant, looking as if they've tumbled, giving them an appearance of flowing? How is a platter of sashimi laid out so the slices fanned in a pattern reminiscent of the fish's scales?

Since ancient times, the arrangement of foods in Japan has been a matter of considerable artistic attention. It is an awareness, an exploitation, of space and balance and design that contributes to the sensory experience of eating. Japan's cuisine is not unique in the elevation of food's presentation as a creative expression, of course. Japanese cooks, however, have over the centuries elevated food arrangement into an art, a three dimensional offering, and one that reflects a particular, unique aesthetic that exemplifies profound aspects of Japan's culture.

As with nearly all Japanese arts, techniques and methods of presenting foods were long ago institutionalized and formalized. Schools were devoted to it. The "Shijo" school of food preparation and presentation dates back to the 9th century and still exists today. Details may differ but the principles of arranging food on plates and in bowls, however, are consistent with the elements characterizing nearly all Japanese art:

--An attention to the natural and to the compositions of nature always attend a Japanese meal's presentation. A bowl of miso-shiru might seem artlessly simple. With an informed perception, however, this bowl of soup has been as deliberately layered as a painting. The chopped nibbles of green onion float. Mushrooms are cut and arranged so they just touch the surface, their bulk disappearing into the cloudy miso broth. Hidden on the bowl's bottom, which is usually lacquered black to give added depth to the liquid, may be tofu cubes revealed only with a gentle stir of your chopsticks. As with a stroll through a Japanese garden or hike in the mountains, you cannot see it all at once. A correctly prepared bowl of miso-shiru unfolds as it is eaten.

The attention to nature is seen, too, in the choice of eating vessels. A clear glass bowl holding chilled somen noodles lends a refreshing sensation on a sweltering July day. Rice served in a rough, dark ceramic bowl that looks warm and lends heat to the hands as it's used provides a feeling of coziness to a winter's meal. An awareness of seasons becomes incorporated into the meal.

--Efficiency and practicality also underlie the meal's aesthetics. Beauty in Japanese art is rarely just decorative. Underneath is a wonderful functionality. That small ceramic dish holding yaki-bitashi, for instance, shishito peppers grilled and steeped in shoyu, may look flat, yet you will see the bottom is gently curved, just enough to hold a trace of the soy sauce and

dashi broth, so the peppers continue to marinate during the meal. A larger dish holding an entire grilled fish, on the other hand, is designed so no juices will pool and make the fish soggy. Subtle details contribute to the enjoyment of the meal if one takes the time to appreciate them.

--Hacho, or deliberate asymmetry, characterizes Japanese food arrangement. A trio of courses, in three bowls, would be boring arranged in an equilateral triangle on the table or just lined side by side. When one bowl is slightly offset, the other two close beside one another, the meal attracts our attention. It has a spatial dynamism. Rounds of sliced maki-zushi placed on a square dish provide a pleasant contrast that would be missing on a round platter. That's why nigiri-zushi is slanted when lined on a plate as if wind-blown; nature does not work in straight lines.

There are a number of formal styles of arranging food in a Japanese meal, with distinctive names.

Tempura is often arranged kasanemori style, "piled" in a heap—yet assembled so carefully that one can remove any piece without collapsing the structure. Vegetables of varying shapes and colors are typically arranged mazemori style, mounded artistically. Look closely and you will see when mazemori dishes are shallow, the mound of cooked vegetables will come just above the rim; in a deeper dish, the top will be two-thirds up to the rim. This kind of balance is attractive, suggesting "just enough" in the respective portions. (For the same reason, correctly served, a scoop of rice in a Japanese meal is

arranged in a long horizontal ridge across the width of the bowl, never just piled on like an ice cream cone.)

Like the bowl of miso-shiru, it is hard to imagine how much simpler could be a plate of raw fish sashimi. If you know how to look, though, you discern deliberate design. There are, for instance, always three ingredients accompanying sashimi. To complement the fish is a key ingredient; often finely shredded daikon or chopped seaweed, meant to cleanse the palate and reduce any trace of "fishiness" from the sashimi. Alongside is also a tsuma (literally "wife"), that may be piquant shiso leaves or similar, sharply flavored berries or sprigs. And there is a karami ("pungent ingredient") or yakumi that provide spice. Wasabi is the most common karami for sashimi. Pickled ginger buds, grated ginger, chopped pickled plums are all also used. "Yakumi"

literally means "medicine;" a hint that once this element of sashimi served a role in preventing dangerous bacteria from growing in the raw fish.

You will also see how these three accompaniments to sashimi are arranged: the daikon tangles under and behind the fish slices, the wasabi in front on one side, and the tsuma accompaniment on the other. Such a presentation makes it easy to taste first a bite of

the fish, then a taste of the flavorful shiso, than some of the karami, and finally a nibble of the daikon threads to prepare one's mouth for the next bite. It is all laid out, thoughtfully, artistically.

Certainly, it's possible to enjoy Japanese food without any knowledge or sensitivity to these subtleties. Perhaps, in a modern, busy age, they don't even matter so much. Even so, they are there. If you know how to see them.

Dave Lowry is a writer and a dedicated student of Japanese martial arts. He has published widely, from the Japanese traditional arts to food.

A correctly prepared bowl of miso-shiru unfolds as it is eaten.

Obento In Context

Debra Samuels



Obento, a Japanese meal designed to fit in a sectioned box, is famously portable. But is also consumed at home or in a restaurant. The box can be as simple as an aluminum oval that holds rice and a pickled plum (umeboshi) to evoke the Japanese flag, or as sublime as a multi-tiered porcelain container filled with foods laden with seasonal symbols for oshogatsu, the Japanese new year. In

between are the bento boxed lunches carried to school and work that are targeted toward the age and sex of the user. All reveal Japanese sensibilities of nutrition and esthetics, and Japan's culinary traditions.

Bento is a powerful symbol of culture and values such as effort and obligation. The person who prepared the meal made the effort; the one

From kitschy to streamline; made from plastic or wood, there is a box that can fit every design and dietary need.

who it was made for is obliged to appreciate that and is expected to eat the meal in its entirety. The sign of a mother's love for her child is not without anxiety and pressure as her efforts are being judged by teachers, other mothers and children are making their own comparisons; peer pressure is significant.

The planning and execution of an obento is the same for a 5-year-old as it is for a 50-year-old. Nutritional and caloric needs are always considered, the contents are always arranged in an eye-catching fashion, and the yum factor is always high. Compared to a Western style lunch, portions are smaller and the variety is greater. Historically a simple obento used to consist mostly of rice or rice balls, (onigiri or omusubi) wrapped in roasted seaweed and accompanied by some pickles—the perfect portable meal.

Today, the box and all of the accompanying accouterments, is big business in Japan. Ready made bento is available at all convenience stores, railway stations, and food emporia. Even busy restaurants offer this classy take-out. Books and magazines take up shelf space in bookstores and newsstands with endless recipes, tips, and short cuts, devoted to the subject. A mom might make lunch for her school age or adult children, her husband, and herself—all before leaving for work. And more recently magazines and books aimed at single men encourage them to prepare their own bento instead of the less nutritious bowl of noodles for lunch. Known as Danshi bento (guys who can make their own lunch), they are considered desirable potential mates!

From kitschy to streamline; made from plastic or wood, there is a box that can fit every design and dietary need. The boxes usually have two tiers, with dividers for separating food and controlling portion sizes. When one is done with the meal, the box, like a Transformer toy, collapses back into a single layer. Pure genius. There

are molds in the shapes of flowers, cartoon characters, soccer balls, animals, and fans for making attractive rice balls and sandwiches. Fancy toothpicks, silly toothpicks, and mini containers for soy sauce and dressings are part of the clever cache of items all designed to be an inviting part of the mealtime experience. Today the contents of bento boxes can hold pasta, sandwiches, or salad but are made with the same sensibilities that inform the construction using traditional foods.

Although rice takes up a good portion of the box, it is the colorful side dishes (okazu) that, taken together, make the whole. Color is one of the most important considerations when creating a balanced meal. Shoji Morishige, a graphic designer from Fukuoka, in southern Japan, designed a cloth with five colored circles as a reminder to his son who would be living on his own for the first time. It is a furoshiki, used for both wrapping a bento box and as a placemat. Morishige told his son that if he has all these colors on his plate (or in his bento box!) he would have a balanced meal. Morishige-san said he has very fond memories of going fishing as a kid and sitting on a rock, legs dangling toward the ocean, and opening his simple obento lunch and feeling his mother's love.

According to Shin Oshima, a retired professor of linguistics, the word bento comes from the Chinese ideographs for convenience. Over time, the characters have been simplified (弁当). The use of 'o' (お) in the Japanese word obento is the formal way of referring to objects and people. "Bento" is now the familiar term used globally to depict a meal on the go.

A typical traveling bento is called eki-ben, bento bought in a rail station and eaten at one's seat during the trip. Each station, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, offers regional food specialties in distinctive and collectable containers. The eki-ben itself can be a highlight of the trip. Traveling

with food has an American tradition too. Wayfarers in colonial America carried dried corn-meal disks called “Johnnycakes.” In Japan, the most common portable food has long has been rice-based, either as dried rice cakes or as soft rice balls stuffed with tasty surprises. Over time, the progression from need to nicety led to the highly refined Japanese flower-viewing picnic, often held under a canopy of cherry blossoms in the spring. During the Edo period (1603-1857) wealthy Japanese waited under the temporary canopy for the petals’ inevitable fall to the earth while admiring - and then consuming - the food arranged in extravagant multi-tiered lacquer

boxes nestled in box sets for the ultimate moveable feast. The practice continues today, albeit with less elaborate equipment. Revelers lay their often store-bought fare upon plastic mats.

Some present-day containers are made from wood but most are molded plastic with tight-fitting lids to keep food from spilling when transported in a briefcase or a backpack. The form may even indicate the contents, as with triangular cases holding triangle-shaped rice balls or sandwiches. So-called “character-bento” (kyara-ben), depicting anime and much beloved cartoon characters like Hello Kitty, are very popular. So are hot dogs sliced to look like octopus and apple wedges carved into bunnies. Initially created to encourage picky

eaters, their production has accelerated past cute into the realm of art.

Like Japanese anime, bento has gone global. Hundreds of recipe-sharing websites are devoted to the subject in many languages and “kyara-ben” or character bento be it a samurai or Spiderman is an art form for all ages. Books are widely available in English, Asian grocers carry bento boxes and of course now everything is available on line. But you can also find perfectly suitable substitutes with built in dividers, tops with cubbies to stash utensils, and ice packs in your local supermarkets, kitchen shops, and camping outfitters thanks to what I call the Japa-

nification of our plastic ware. It is all about getting into an obento state of mind.

Portions of this article appeared in the exhibit, Obento and Built Space: Japanese Boxed Lunch and Architecture and My Japanese Table A Lifetime of Cooking with Friends and Family, Tuttle Publishing 2011.

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Okinawan Food: The Japanese Cuisine You Don't Know

Teigan Babcock



Source: http://www.tabinchi.net/TABINCHU_IMAGES/SPOT/200324/BASE_GALLERY/200324_6_島時間サブ右.jpg

If you find yourself in the southernmost prefecture of Japan, the islands of Okinawa, chances are you will not find the staples of mainland Japanese cooking, such as sushi, pickles or mushrooms in any traditional restaurant or pub. And even if you do, you may be unaware that these dishes, common in our cities and trendy restaurants, are drastically different from the regional choices of Okinawa. For this, it is important to understand the geographic and historical differences that contributed to the islands' unique culinary character.

Located some 400 miles south of Kyushu and stretching across the East China Sea in a 640 mile arc toward Taiwan, Okinawa was once its own autonomous kingdom, called Ryukyu. The climate ranges

north to south from subtropical to tropical rainforest with high humidity and balmy-to-hot temperatures throughout the year. Historical records indicate the islands have been occupied since the Stone Age, however the Ryukyu Kingdom was not unified until the mid-15th century. For much of its existence, it was a tributary state: first to China, and then to the Tokugawa Shogunate. Japanese food as most people are familiar with did not begin to influence Okinawan cooking until the kingdom was occupied by the Satsuma Domain in 1609 and native Okinawans saw an increase in travel to and from Japan. Before that, their main contact with non-islanders was with the Chinese; it is understandable that Ryukyuan cooks were influenced by what they saw and what they ate when they accompanied envoys out of the kingdom.

There is a comical saying that Okinawans will use every part of the pig in their cooking except for its squeal. The relative isolation of the Ryukyu island chain slowed the spread of Buddhism to Okinawa, which has traditionally placed a strong taboo on the consumption of meat—particularly from four-legged animals (yotsuashi). Whereas the four main islands of Japan are surrounded by rich fishing grounds containing a plethora of different species, Okinawa has comparatively few. Additionally, the higher temperatures and humidity made preserving seafood more difficult than in the north. By the time the Tokugawa Shogunate rule was established, the islands already had a long history of obtaining protein from livestock, primarily pigs. They made for easier keeping on the small grazing land available than cattle. Even today, visitors to the capital city, Naha, can easily find pictures of pigs decorating restaurants, pig-themed

omiyage (souvenirs), and whole pig heads on display in fresh markets and butchers (often decorated with sunglasses and fake flowers in an show of gallows humor). There are even vacuum-sealed and smoked pig faces (chiraga) perfect for taking back home and sharing—or shocking your friends. Chiraga has a similar texture to jerky, but it is also commonly cut into strips and added to soup for both flavor and protein.

One of the most well-known pork dishes hailing from Okinawa is rafute—a delicious dish of braised pork belly, simmered in a mixture of soy sauce, sugar and Okinawa’s native distilled alcohol called awamori. The long cooking time turns the meat fall-off-the-bone tender and gives it a delicious flavor. Like many foods in Japan, it carries an air of superstition—it supposedly provides longevity of those who consume it. Perhaps that is why it became one of the staple dishes of the Okinawan Royal Court and was only served to members of the royal family and to visiting dignitaries. Rafute has since become an everyman’s dish and has even been exported, thanks to Okinawan immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, to Hawaii, where it is known as “Shoyu Pork” and is quite common.

Perhaps no dish embodies the image and flavor of Okinawa better than goya chanpuru. Goya is one of those foods that you either love or hate. Its name is often translated as “bitter melon,” however, it appears similar in size and shape to a cucumber, with the exception of knobby warts and ridges covering its surface. This flowering vine hails from India, and it is thought that trade with the Chinese brought it to the Ryukyu Kingdom, where it has since become a major ingredient in Okinawan cooking. Odds are, even if you find it in on your plate in Tokyo, you’re eating an Okinawan dish.

Goya is generally considered to be an extremely healthy vegetable, although the science behind some of its more miraculous-sounding qualities is murky. Nevertheless it is high in Vitamin C and anti-oxidants,

and has shown promise in lowering blood sugar in diabetics. It is, as the name states, very bitter, however cooking it tends to soften the flavor. Chanpuru is simply a stir-fry, borrowing the Okinawan word for “something mixed.” Traditional chanpuru recipes call for tofu, some kind of vegetable, and meat or fish; goya chanpuru is a mixture of sliced goya, tofu, egg and pork (sliced or cubed Spam), seasoned with dashi, soy sauce and sake. For many years, this quintessential island dish was found only on Okinawa, though it has since become more popular outside of the prefecture.

Okinawa’s long history of semi-independence, plus trade and cultural exchange with China, influenced the palate of traditional Ryukyuan cuisine. Although there are some similarities to traditional Japanese cooking such as the incorporation of salt, miso, and kombu broth for foundational flavors, these are relatively recent introductions; many of the staples of the Okinawan diet in terms of produce and spices are notably different or absent from Japanese cooking and are due to its long relationship with China. The popularity of Okinawan food has gained traction in mainstream Japan over the past several decades,

particularly with the rising research behind Okinawa’s world-renowned long lifespans. Dishes such as rafute and goya chanpuru may sound exotic to non-Japanese now, but it is not improbable to imagine the West’s love affair with Japanese cuisine eventually leading to a boom in colorful, flavorful Okinawan cooking.

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Source: http://imgcp.aacdn.jp/img-a/1200/auto/global-aa-j-front/article/2016/02/56aec1876d895_56acbb6641189_1806437739.png

Adaptation and Innovation in Japanese Cuisine

Linda Austin

The U.S. may be known as a melting pot of people and cultures, but Japan is more than equal in the food category. Those in the U.S. who scoff at fat sushi rolls with cream cheese and mayo, sushi burritos, Matzo ball ramen, or ramen burgers might be shocked to see what is available in Japan. The Japanese are serious about their food, but not afraid to mix and match.

In Japan, annual rice consumption has fallen while demand for meat has risen. The Japanese are enjoying Western foods, often with a twist. McDonald's offers an ebi fillet, which is a burger containing a fried "cutlet" made of shrimp and covered in Thousand Island sauce. Around the holidays, Donald McDonald (Ronald's twin) may advertise "potato fries" with a drizzle of chocolate sauce—plus a drizzle of sugary purple satsuma imo (sweet potato) sauce and/or orange pumpkin sauce around Halloween time. Mos Burger offers burgers filled with kinpira (seasoned carrot and gobo) or seafood okonomiyaki (pancake-omelet) sandwiched between buns made of rice.

The Japanese use pizza dough as a canvas for creativity. Pizza-la restaurants serve cheese and honey pizzas. Domino's serves avocado shrimp pizza, as well as a potato pizza generously striped with mayonnaise. That's Kewpie mayo, which comes in a soft squirt bottle and has an umami taste. Anyone who frowns at the mayo found on U.S. sushi rolls will frown at all the mayo used on the food in Japan—on okonomiyaki, on takoyaki (fried balls of battered octopus), in tuna sushi rolls like in the U.S., on cooked vegetables and toast and shrimp . . . and much more.

Ketchup is another condiment enjoyed in Japan.

Spaghetti Naporitan (Napolitan) is a quick way to make spaghetti with tomato sauce. No need to simmer sauce on the stove for an hour or find a jar of Prego—just pour ketchup on the noodles. Ketchup is also involved in making omuraisu (omelet rice). Stir ketchup into fried rice, then use the rice as a filling inside a very thin, rolled-up omelet. Serve with ketchup drizzled across the top. Italian-style nabe (a one-pot, tabletop-cooked, soupy stew) is made by adding ketchup to the soup stock and including tomatoes, broccoli, and cheese.

Ramen seems to be the latest Japanese food craze in the U.S. This is not the dried noodles with seasoned preservatives that college kids eat on the cheap, although plenty of people around the world enjoy that. Ramen noodles are Chinese in origin, and therefore "ramen" is spelled in katakana, the Japanese alphabet used for foreign words. Good ramen means fresh chuuka noodles swimming in a broth, with various toppings depending on style and region—or innovation. The real success of ramen lies in the broth. Tonkotsu style broth is made of pork bones simmered for days until it is rich and cream colored. Other styles use fish, chicken, vegetable, miso, or soy sauce broth.

Most ramen bowls contain thin slices of chashu pork (marinated pork belly simmered until meltingly tender) and a ramen egg (marinated, very soft-boiled egg) cut in half. Other traditional toppings include mushrooms, bean sprouts, bamboo shoots, green onion, and nori (dried seaweed). Butter and kernel corn are a newer addition. But ramen can now be found topped with fried chicken or kimchi. In the U.S., it is difficult to find broth that can com-

pare to that from ramen-ya in Japan, where ramen is an art (see the movies *Tampopo* and *Ramen Girl*). But, for those who have never eaten good ramen in Japan, the broth at their favorite local Asian restaurant may taste just fine.

The ramen burger made its debut in New York and then grew popular on the U.S. West Coast and in Hawaii. Ramen noodles are boiled, drained, and cooled, then mixed with egg and shaped into “buns” and fried. Japanese-American chef Kenzo Shimamoto adapted the Japanese street-food version, which uses thin chashu pork slices, to an American-style ground beef patty.

Hawaii has a strong Japanese influence. Hawaiian Hurricane microwave popcorn comes with rice crackers and furikake (seaweed sprinkles). Hawaiian Typhoon comes with packets of sour cream and chive seasoning and furikake. Loco moco has long been popular in Hawaii and made its way into Japan. This invention consists of white rice topped with a hamburger patty, egg fried sunny-side up, and gravy—break the egg, mix all together, add ketchup or soy sauce or both as desired. The rice and meat with “wet” egg could be considered a cousin to Japanese donburi.

Dairy products became more common in Japan after WWII. Japan is known for its many unusual flavors of soft ice cream. Green tea and azuki red bean ice creams can be found in some U.S. grocery stores, but not roasted tea, black sesame, kudzu, or sweet potato flavors. Häagen Daz makes flavors just for Japan, such as kinako with kuromitsu sauce



McDonald's Fries: courtesy of Marika Kaori of Tokyo, Japan

(sweet soybean powder flavor with brown sugar syrup).

Basic cheeses are available in Japanese stores. Shredded cheddar is sometimes added to curry to thicken up the sauce. Of course, curry is not native to Japan, but it is popular there and not quite the same taste as East Asian curries. Curry goes with French fries, too. Nissin, the ramen cup noodle franchise, has opened a new kind of curry shop in Shibuya station. Drip Curry Meshi Tokyo offers fifteen condiment choices to flavor instant kare raisu (curry rice) in a styrofoam cup. Hot water is poured into the cups through filters filled with ground coffee, jasmine tea leaves, dried bonito flakes, maple syrup, or other unusual options. The Japanese seem very open-minded and adventurous when it comes to food!

The Japanese enjoy chocolate, too. Some Asian food stores in the U.S. now carry matcha green tea KitKats, but in Japan, tourists like to collect KitKat bars with flavors such as sakura, wasabi, apple, strawberry cheesecake, red bean, hojicha roasted tea, and sake. KitKat pronounced in Japanese sounds like “kitto katsu,” which means “you will surely win,” and finding all 300+ flavors would surely make you a winner.

Of course, Japan is renowned for high-end cuisine. Yoshihiro Murata is the chef owner of Kyoto's Kikunoi restaurant serving kaiseki —meals of many artfully arranged courses based on season and tradi-



Italian Nabe menu: courtesy of Cindy Lineburg of Kobe, Japan

tion. Murata said, “Protecting tradition actually requires evolving. You have to move forward or it will die.” Kaiseki has evolved in a thousand years from a few simple dishes served at tea ceremonies to a high art that has influenced chefs worldwide. Murata teaches the concept of kaiseki so it can be used and adapted outside of Japan.

Anthony Bourdain, the famous chef and television personality who has eaten his way around the globe, said his favorite destination is Japan. “For those with restless, curious minds, fascinated by layer upon layer of things, flavors, tastes, and customs which we will never fully be able to understand, Tokyo is deliciously unknowable.”

While Japanese foods that are not fixed the “traditional way” may be disappointing, why not enjoy what tastes good, authentic or not. Try it, you might like it—as long as the rice is cooked perfectly.

Linda Austin is a board member of JASSTL and a member of the JAS Women’s Association. She wrote and published her mother’s WWII Japan memoir, “Cherry Blossoms in Twilight,” and tries to keep up with all things Japanese.

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Food Connects Us:

“It tastes better when we eat together”

Noriko Yuasa



In 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture announced that washoku (Japanese food culture) was recognized as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was some of the brightest news for the Japanese nation after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. I recall how happy our family and friends in Japan were to hear the news and how proud they were about

washoku being recognized by UNESCO. Wa means Japan or Japanese and shoku means food or eat. Wa is a cultural concept and can imply harmony within a social community over personal interests. I believe the concept of wa is deeply rooted in our idea of Japanese food culture. As a Japanese person who lives in the United States, I have personally observed the different attitudes of the two cultures on this specific topic.

One of the unique Japanese food customs can be seen in the bento (Japanese lunch box). Bento is a Japanese word for a packed lunch prepared for school, work, or picnic. These days, the bento box is very popular in the United States, and you can even purchase Japanese style bento box containers through amazon.com. The role of the homemade bento in Japanese life is significant. Even when there is little conversation between an adolescent child and a parent, the box lunch can be a communication tool between the two. The television series, “Thank You for 461 Pieces. ~ Father and Child’s Bonds Fostered by Affection Lunch Boxes” was aired on Japan TV in 2015. Based on a true story, a musician and twice divorced father made a promise to make lunch for his son every day for three years, during his attendance in high school, as a way to support his son. This TV drama presented a very typical idea of how the bento experience ties a family together. This is a simple theme but was effective and touched the audience’s heart by using the subject matter of bento as communication tool.

My mother used to wake up early to make a full breakfast and prepared bento in the morning for each family member. She continued to do so for a total of six years when I attended junior high school and high school. For a Japanese mother, preparing a healthy, balanced bento is an expression of her love for her family. Making bento is more than just lunch, but a family connection. Mothers check how children are doing when the empty bento box is returned, signifying her children have eaten all of the food. It seems like a one-way communication from the cook, but the response is without words. Actions can speak

louder than words. For Japanese who do not show much affection using words, this action is very crucial. My father had the largest bento box with more rice in it, of course. Each day, I looked forward to the bento lunchtime because of these cultural and family connections.

There is an old Japanese saying *Onaji kama no meshi wo kuu*, which literal translation is “Eating from the same pot,” and it describes the close relationship among friends and family. My mother used to tell me that “Everything tastes better when we eat together.” Usually, she said this when she wanted to taste what I was eating. We often shared food together even when we would eat out. This practice was always comforting in some way. By eating together and sharing food, we doubled our happiness and we felt closer by doing so.

I realized that I often offer my plate to share with others before tasting myself. My American friends often say “No thank you.” I didn’t think anything of it until witnessing a conversation between my son and his American Grandma. My son was simply offering his grandma a taste of his Japanese sushi roll that he ordered, just as I usually do. She was trying to be nice and re-

sponded by saying, “Only if you can’t finish it. I will taste it when you know you can’t finish, and then I will finish for you.” My son continued, “Grandma, you don’t need to eat for me, just try if you want to.” This conversation went on for about five minutes. My American mother-in-law felt bad by taking food from her grandson. My son liked the sushi and wanted his grandma to try it.



It was a small cultural misunderstanding, but both of them were obviously concerned about each other.

School lunch is another aspect that is very unique to Japanese culture and shows how we educate children through food. My children were born and raised in the United States but also attended Japanese public school during the summers

when we visited Japan. They made friends and learned so much about Japanese culture through the school setting. Their favorite class time was *Kyuushoku* (Lunchtime) and this always made me smile. Lunchtime is not actually class time but I understand why they thought it was. In Japanese elementary school, there is no cafeteria and children eat lunch in their own classroom

with their teacher. *Kyuushoku* is a part of the teamwork element displayed in Japan. Students are split into groups and given serving duty. Everyone waits until serving duty is completed. Everyone puts their hands together while saying “*Itadakimasu*” before eating and everyone eats the same food. Once, my son was advised by the teacher to eat his meal before eating the fruit. He

learned that fruit is considered as the dessert in Japan. Students are also expected to eat everything on their plate. There are no unhealthy choices in a Japanese school lunch. Students learn the common, communal rules while eating the same food at the same time. By doing so, we learn to live together in society.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and

Technology created a web page, specifically for food education for younger generations. (<http://www.mext.go.jp/syokuiku/what/index.html>) On the home page, it asks the following four questions: Do you eat breakfast? Does everyone eat together? Are you greeting others when eating? Are you helping with meals? These questions demonstrate an emphasis on the importance on how we eat, rather than what we eat. This represents the Japanese view of food education to me.

Based on my experiences with Japanese food culture, I believe that the Japanese put importance on communal rules to maintain harmony and living together in society, over personal interests. While taking time to actually think about this topic for this article, I am reminded of the beauty of Japanese food culture as it relates to relationships. Whether it is a parent's loving preparation of the family's bento lunch, or the team building and

communal rules of Japanese school lunch, or sharing dishes with family and friends, we can see how food connects us.

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