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Bento boxes are a "little bit of home", says chef

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By [Elaine Lies](#)

TOKYO (Reuters Life!) - There are many reasons to eat bento boxes, Japan's packed lunch in a compartmentalized box: weight control, saving money, or just enjoying Japanese culture.

But bento cook and blogger Makiko Itoh says that, above all, eating a bento is like taking a "little bit of home" with you wherever you are.

Though Itoh says there's nothing wrong with making bentos cute, an art that has risen to nearly cult status in Japan with the name "kyaraben," she emphasizes the practical, wanting to bring the bento -- in Japanese, obento -- out of the realm of art and make it an integral part of daily life.

Brought up in Japan, the United States and Britain, and long a resident of Switzerland, Itoh has learned to adapt her cooking to wherever she finds herself. Her book, "The Just Bento Cookbook," reflects this blend of East and West, with recipes ranging from traditional soba noodles to quinoa salads and sandwiches.

She also runs a blog, www.justbento.com, which had around 365,000 subscribers as of November.

Q: Is "practical" the niche you see your cookbook filling?

A: "All those little cute bentos are very visual. People look at them and say "Wow, that's a bento that pretends to be a Nintendo DS." It looks great. But my feeling is that a bento is an everyday thing. It's for everyone that wants to bring a healthy lunch from home, save some money, control what they eat. It shouldn't just be regarded as a cute novelty in the same vein as Hello Kitty characters or whatever... I don't want it to be regarded just as something for kids. I want it to be for students, for busy professionals, for anyone right now, because eating out is so expensive no matter where you're living. So if you can bring a lunch with food that you want from home, it saves you money, and it's way more interesting than a brown bag sandwich."

Q: Was your mother a great bento maker?

A: "She was a working mother, from when I was about 11 she had a full-time job and three kids. She would make us bentos in the morning but she didn't bother with the cute, beautiful stuff. It was good food, it'd fill you up. But I always loved my mother's bentos even though they were sometimes a bit plain."

Q: Did you ever really want a cute bento?

A: "Some of my schoolmates would have beautiful bentos and I would say wow, but then I would realize how much time that must have taken. I knew my mother was way too busy for that. And actually when I was growing up, that beautiful cute character bento was not in vogue. That's maybe the last eight to 10 years.

"I think it's the Internet. The original reason and probably the basic reason is to get their kids to eat, but if it wasn't for being able to have a platform to show off their artistic work, I don't think it would be as popular, to be honest.

"I admire people who do that and I do attempt it myself sometimes, but for one thing I don't have kids, and my (Swiss) husband doesn't care as long as it tastes good. Actually, what he really says is 'I don't feel comfortable eating Hello Kitty. It's like eating a face.'"

Q: What are the big questions you hear about bentos?

A: "The biggest problem people have is: what do you mean, the food is cold? And how are you supposed to deal with food safety. My response is that all bento-appropriate food is meant to be eaten at room temperature and is meant to be tasty and safe if eaten a few hours after it's assembled.

"But if you think about it, when you eat food it's not always piping hot, it doesn't have to be, except for soups and stews. Even a sandwich, you eat it at room temperature and you don't worry about it being safe. People don't really get it until they've actually tried it."

Q: What would you put in a bento?

A: "It depends on my mood, but if it's a Japanese bento I really like to have a slice of tamagoyaki (rolled omelet) in there. It's just something very comforting, that just slightly-sweet egg. If it's non-Japanese it doesn't really matter. I'm also really fond of little savory muffins."

Q: For bento makers, what are some of your recommendations?

A: "I would say, just try making one. Just think of food that you like, that you might like to eat for lunch, that may or may not need to be heated up but is portable. Get a box that is portable, it doesn't have to be a dedicated bento box. It can be just a Tupperware or whatever, just a sealable, washable box, and pack food that you like in it, and see how it goes.



"When people think of leftovers they think oh, ew, leftovers. But if you set aside some food on purpose for your bento, and you have some cooked vegetables and then you put them together attractively, you've spent no money at all on another meal."

SWEET PEPPER KINPIRA

Kinpira refers to a method of stir-frying shredded or julienned vegetables quickly in a fragrant, spicy oil. Kinpira tastes great hot or cold.

2 teaspoons sesame oil

yellow and red pepper, de-seeded and sliced

1 tablespoon white sesame seeds, toasted

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 pinch red chili flakes

Heat the oil in a frying pan over high heat and add the peppers. Saute for 3-4 minutes until they turn a brighter color but are still crisp. Add the sesame seeds, soy sauce and chili. Stir until the soy sauce has evaporated. Let cool before packing.

(Editing by [Paul Casciato](#))

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