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J I C C G O U R M E T

As part of the launch of **Japan Information & Culture Center (JICC), Embassy of Japan's** JICC Gourmet, we will be offering a JICC Gourmet limited newsletter series.

We hope that this educational newsletter series can help you learn more about various intriguing and lesser known elements of Japanese food culture.

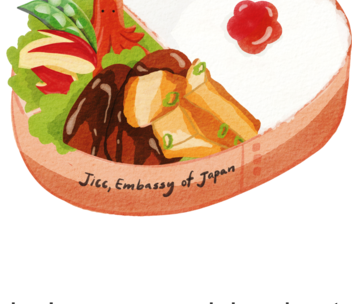
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JICC Gourmet Newsletter #1:

Bento Culture

This month as part of our JICC Gourmet launch, you may have had the chance to watch our film screening "Bento Harassment," or perhaps you participated in or viewed our bento contest entries. Did the imagery of bento make you hungry to learn more? In this newsletter we will elaborate on how the bento came to be an integral part of Japanese society and what exactly makes a bento! We hope you will join us in reading more about bento culture in Japan in our first JICC Gourmet newsletter.

What is a bento and why is it important?



Bento (弁当 べんとう), or Japanese lunch boxes, consist of a portable lunch box with a variety of dishes arranged in a visually appealing manner. In Japan, **bento is viewed as an art form** that many Japanese people aim to perfect. While many are familiar with the concept of bento due to its recent global fame, it might come as a surprise the importance they play in Japanese people's lives as well as in the history of Japan. Since the visual appearance of a meal is just as important as

the taste in Japanese cuisine, bento allow even the busiest Japanese person to enjoy a visually pleasing and delicious meal on the go. Homemade bento are also **viewed as a vehicle of communication** between the creator and the consumer; in many cases the expression of love between a parent and his or her child.

A Brief History of Bento

While the true origin of bento is still contested, many believe the concept appeared in the **5th century** among hunters, farmers, or warriors. While forms of bento have been around since ancient Japan, the term bento was not coined until the samurai age when **Oda Nobunaga**, the Japanese daimyō of the **Sengoku period**, ordered simple, individual meals ("bento") be served to his castle staff.

In the **Edo Period** (1603-1868), the bento became an essential meal for outings. In particular, the **makunouchi bento** (幕の内 まくのうち), or 'between-scenes bento,' consisting of small onigiri, or rice balls, sprinkled with sesame seeds and various side dishes, was the most popular type of bento to consume between acts of a play—hence its name.



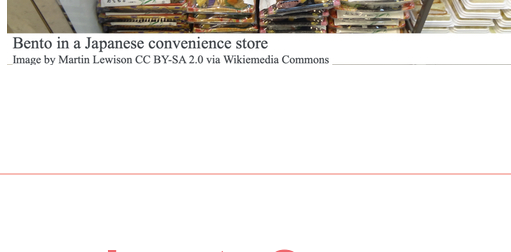
Gotenyama Park - Edo Meisho (Hanami bento in Edo) by Hiroshige Ando 1797-1858



Vendors selling ekiben to train passengers in 1902.

The **Meiji period** (1868-1912) saw rapid industrialization and the advent of train travel, which led to the need for convenient and on-the-go bento. As a result, **ekiben** (駅弁 えきべん), or 'station bento,' which could be taken on the trains for a quick meal while traveling across the country, rose in popularity. The first ekiben is said to have been sold at Utsunomiya station in Tochigi prefecture in 1885.

In modern Japan, many of these bento remain popular choices; however, to match the busy lifestyles of many employees and students in Japan, even **convenience stores carry a wide array** of bento that can be eaten as is or even heated up for them right at the store!



Bento in a Japanese convenience store
Image by Martin Lewison CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons

What goes into a bento?

Many bento are set up with a 1:1:1 ratio of rice, protein, and veggies. A typical bento will include rice or onigiri, some type of meat or fish, and one or more pickled, boiled, or marinated vegetable side dishes. Some popular bento dishes in modern Japan include sweet Japanese omelet or sausages. While it was common for many stay-at-home mothers to spend hours pouring love into each dish they made and arranging them for their children's lunch, recently more and more families see both parents working full-time, so the creation of bento ingredients has also transformed. Now busy parents and students can opt for pre-made bento side dishes in the freezer section at the grocery store.



Left image: Edo period layered bento box.



Middle image: Pre-made bento sides at the store (Image by justbento.com).



Right image: Onigiri (rice ball) store-bought bento.

Bento Art: The Kyara-ben



The **kyara-ben** (キャラ弁; also romanized as 'chara-ben') or character bento became especially popular in the 1990s among mothers making bento for their children. Kyara-ben are bento with ingredients shaped or arranged in a way to create an image of a popular character or scene. The purpose of the kyara-ben was to make an exciting and relatable bento that encouraged the child to eat a wide variety of foods. Now it is so popular, there are even contests, like the **JICC's Bento contest** this August. See the winners of the contest [here!](#)



Above image: JICC logo kyara-ben, ham and cheese Washington monument, red bell pepper sakura, and nori (dried seaweed)-bun, ink.

Left image: Kyara-ben using mini sausages as octopus, a popular bento side dish.



Right image: Bento tools used to make cute kyara-ben (Wendy Copley CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 via Flickr).

Works Consulted

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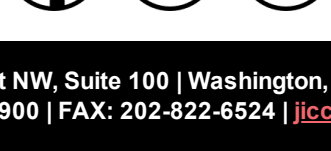
MORE ABOUT JICC GOURMET

Food is such an important expression of culture, and Japan expresses its unique culture through food in a vibrant and joyous way. From commonly known staples like ramen and sushi to lesser known foods like shojin ryori, or Buddhist cuisine, Japan has a wide range of food culture and tradition to explore. That is why we are excited to introduce JICC Gourmet.

This ongoing series will explore Japanese food through newsletters, films, lectures, and other related events. Creating a sense of community has always been important to us and food is something that we all can connect with and share. This simple idea is what inspired JICC Gourmet.

To learn more about JICC Gourmet related film screenings, events, and activities [click here](#).

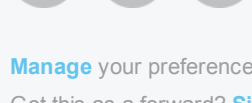
Let us know what you enjoyed most from this newsletter
on social media with #DCJICC!



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