

bentobox

Let this Japanese cuisine add color to your meals



Jo An in Erlanger offers a shokado bento box if you don't want to make your own.

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Perhaps you've seen it around the office lunch room – a person pulls out a box containing intricately arranged food.

Or maybe your children told stories of classmates bringing lunches of little plastic containers with cheese slices shaped like bears or whales and carrots arranged like an anime face.

What is this container-based form of dining with a penchant for the cutesy that encroaches upon the brown paper bags and cardboard microwave meals that have become our comfortable lunchtime standard?

It's bento.

WHAT'S BENTO?

"A bento lunch is a compact, balanced, visually appealing lunch," says Deborah Hamilton (aka "Biggie"), who runs www.lunchinabox.net. A San Franciscan who spent nine years in Japan, Hamilton turned to bento when her husband was misdiagnosed with a food intolerance. Since then, she's found that bento is an ideal lunchtime solution for

moms on the go.

A Japanese form of cuisine, bento is simply a box with different foods arranged or stacked using dividers to keep the items separate. Traditionally, the base of the meal is cooked rice or noodles. Sides can include proteins such as fish or tofu, fruits and vegetables usually cut into small pieces. In Japan, bento can be purchased pre-made (kind of like a Lunchable, but with fresh ingredients) or in a restaurant, but there's a lot of cultural importance placed on a handmade bento box.

Stateside, this traditional form of dining is becoming a culinary trend, and it's not hard to see why.

"Bento-style lunches reduce waste such as plastic baggies and disposable containers," Hamilton says, "and they allow you to pack a wider variety of food for lunch. Portion control is also easy if you follow the general packing rule of thumb of three parts carbs, one part protein and two parts fruits and vegetables, without candy, junk food or oily foods. Packed this way without gaps, a 600 ml box holds a 600-calorie meal – a simple method for weight loss without counting calories."

Also, the challenge of packing a bento box – a task that's

heavy on presentation, with balance, color and texture all playing important roles – is creative and forces you to think about food as more than just a way to end the discomfort of hunger.

CAN YOU BENTO?

Of course you can. All you really need is a way to pack your foods and some ideas to get you started.

In terms of packing a bento box, there's no need to break the bank on setup – a lunchbox and some reusable containers will work just fine. For many, however, the bento experience is complemented by the many eye-pleasing bento boxes that are available. "Authentic" bento boxes can be ordered through www.jbox.com, while an interesting American take on the bento box can be ordered at www.laptoplunches.com. Amazon and eBay are also good resources.

The contents of a bento meal are what make it special, however, and it is in constructing the various items in an aesthetically pleasing way that most people find their inner bento artist.

"Bento boxes don't have to be filled with Japanese food," Hamilton says. "I often pack

GO OUT FOR BENTO

Many local Japanese restaurants serve bento boxes that require nothing more of you than a willingness to order and a form of payment. Here are just a few restaurants that will serve you a bento box filled with delightful Japanese cuisine.

MATSUYA JAPANESE RESTAURANT

Variety of bento options are available.

7149 Manderlay Drive, Florence
859-746-1199

JO AN JAPANESE RESTAURANT

Makunouchi and Shokado bento are available.

3940 Olympic Blvd., Erlanger
859-746-2634
www.joanjapanese.com

MEI

A number of "Lunch Box" options allow you to create your own bento box.

8608 Market Place Lane, Montgomery
513-891-6880
www.meijapaneserestaurant.com

GREEN PAPAYA

A variety of lunch boxes, with options that include sushi and traditional Thai offerings, are available for dine-in only.

2942 Wasson Road, Oakley
513-731-0107



PROVIDED

This bento box is available (without the food, of course) at laptoplunches.com for \$20.99.

whatever we happen to be eating that week: Mexican, Thai, Chinese, American, Indian – the possibilities are endless!" She adds that leftovers make great bento additions, so make a bit extra the night before and think creatively to give leftovers a "makeover."

"Leftover stew or curry can become a pasta sauce or

a dumpling filling," she says. "Pan-fry leftover polenta for polenta fries."

A good bento box makes you smile when you open the lid – think about texture and color combinations of foods when "designing" your bento. Lunchinabox.net has plenty of ideas, and you can also check out justbento.com or search for "bento" on Flickr.