

PACK A BOXED LUNCH LIKE A PRO



Just think of the last time you savored a bento box – tucking into the tray of tiny dishes is like opening an edible gift box. The bento also offers efficient lessons in how to arrange a meal to take with you on the road, packing many flavors and textures into one compact container, yet keeping each component intact.

How do the bento masters do it? I've always wondered. So I was glad to have the opportunity to meet Mr. Furukawa of BentOn, the go-to place for bento fanciers. BentOn's take on the traditional bento is so popular with customers that last month, Furukawa proudly launched "Bento On Demand."

Of course, the ingredients of the classic bento are traditionally Japanese: seasoned rice, braised seaweed (hijiki), teriyaki chicken and salmon, California roll, egg omelet, steamed kabocha squash. But items on the Western "leftover" menu can also be adapted as bento ingredients: steamed broccoli, spaghetti, potato salad, macaroni salad, pickles. The trick is to position each element in the bento box with care, to create a jigsaw puzzle of tasty treats.

For parents, the bento box provides helpful lessons on how to make food appetizing to finicky kids. For little ones, lunch just seems to taste better if it

looks colorful and cute. And when you're preparing a lunch box for a loved one, regardless of age, it helps to know how to pack the food so the person doesn't wind up uncovering a hot mess at lunch-time. This is why pros like Mr. Furukawa carefully place a tiny "fence" of green plastic resembling grass, to create a protective border (baran) separating, say, veggies from chicken.

The basic bento rules are: Components should be at room temperature – neither cold nor hot. They should also not be too liquidy, or they will disintegrate. Also, don't put raw items in a bento, and certainly avoid anything that will melt, such as ice cream or chocolate. After that, you can be as creative as you like! Just keep in mind the advice Mr. Furukawa received from his grandfather, also a bento master: "Remember Mt. Fuji" and build the center of your bento slightly higher than the sides.

— Reported by *Julia Szabo*

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Mr. Furukawa begins building a bento, placing a round, fluted plastic cup at one end. It's a perfect way to contain saucy items, such as potato salad.



It was my turn – and tough to choose from the wide selection of bite-size bento ingredients, ranging from broccoli and kabocha to salmon and seaweed.



I took the master's "Mt. Fuji" reference to heart – ending up with two boxes piled so high with food, they could not accommodate a lid. Less really is more!



This "bento" is really a donburi bowl with a lid and top compartment – perfect for separating salad from rice (available at MoMA Design Store and Whisk [Flatiron and Williamsburg]).