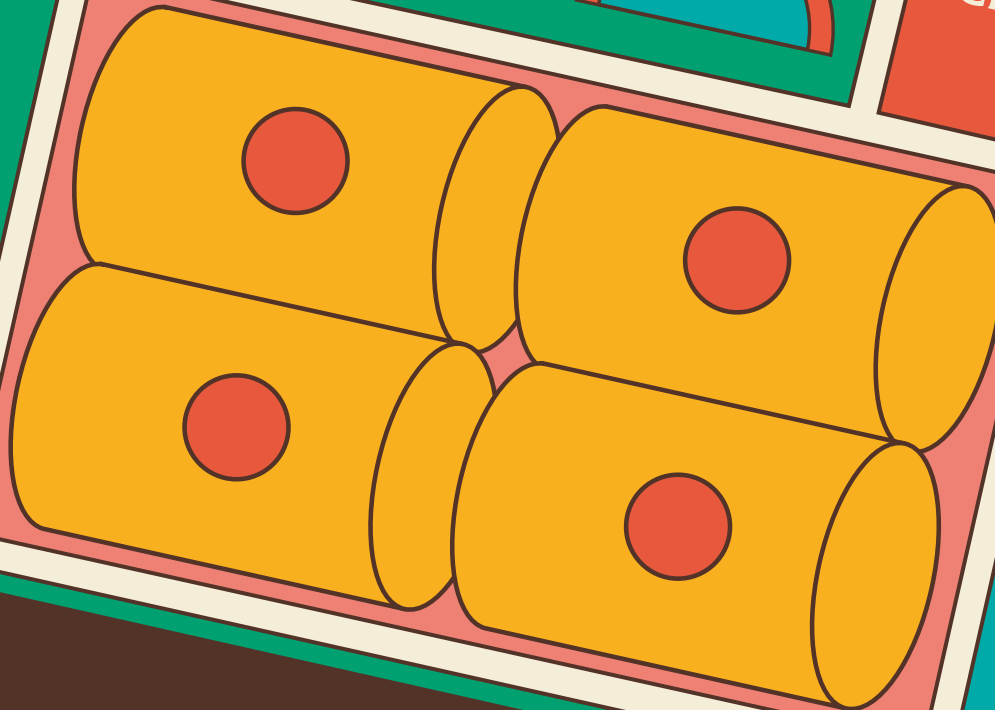


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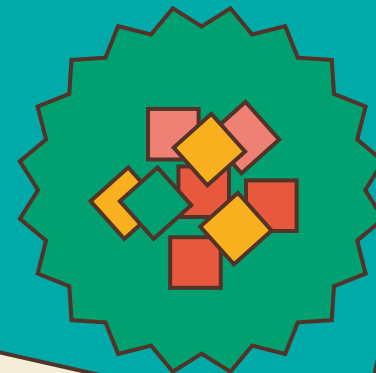
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BUILDING AN EKIBEN

Ekiben vs bento: what's the difference?

Traditionally, ekiben were sold only at train stations, which places a number of constraints on their design:

- they must be safe to eat unrefrigerated for extended periods
- they assume no access to heating – no ovens or microwaves
- they must withstand transport, movement and vibration without spilling or shifting.

As a result, ekiben are tightly packed, rely primarily on cooked or preserved ingredients, and are designed to be enjoyed fully at room temperature.

Ekiben boxes are disposable and lightweight. Unlike bentos taken to work, they are not usually refrigerated or microwaved before being eaten – though you don't need to follow this rule. The idea underpinning this book is to take ekiben recipes and apply them to your everyday life.

How to construct your ekiben

Ekiben are usually – though not always – composed of rice, protein and vegetables. This book explores a number of Japan's most popular ekiben, and provides recipes to cook most of the elements that are included in these delicious packaged meals.

You can decide whether you want to follow the recipes to recreate these ekiben in your own home, or alternatively you can pick and choose elements from across the ekiben to make your own unique ekiben.

If you choose to build your own boxed meal, here are a few guiding principles to creating satisfying and well-balanced bentos which I have learned through research and observation.



1. Base

RICE

Japan is a country of rice, and most ekiben use cooked rice as their foundation. Fill your bento box to a depth of around 1–1.5 cm (½ in) with rice. This allows toppings to flavour the rice evenly, keeping the base and toppings in balance. In this book, we use Japanese table rice for its neutral flavour, gentle sweetness, and ability to stay moist while retaining distinct grains.

This rice layer typically makes up about 50 per cent of the bento.

TAKIKOMI GOHAN / GOMOKU GOHAN

Takikomi gohan is rice that is cooked with ingredients in seasoned stock rather than water. Gomoku gohan is a variation that traditionally includes five ingredients in addition to rice.

NOODLES

The most common noodle base for bento is yakisoba – wheat noodles stir-fried with vegetables, meat and seafood in a sweet-savoury sauce similar to Worcestershire sauce. In Nagasaki, I encountered sara udon (page 210) – crisp fried noodles that stayed crunchy even after cooling. Noodles should generally be fried to prevent clumping. Boiled, starchy noodles like udon tend to stick together when cold, while soba noodles work better due to their lower gluten content.

KETCHUP RICE OR SPAGHETTI NAPOLITAN

For Western-style bentos with richer proteins – such as those with hamburger steak (page 50) or fried chicken (page 96) – the acidity and umami of ketchup rice or spaghetti napolitan makes a perfect base. Ketchup rice or spaghetti napolitan can also stand alone as the primary bento filling, without being topped with other ingredients.

2. Protein

Common ekiben proteins include meat, fish, eggs and tofu. As with commercially prepared ekiben, everything should be thoroughly cooked to ensure food safety during transport and storage.

Proteins should be tender, juicy and well seasoned – and, unless they are soft and easy to slice (as in the case of hamburger), they should be cut into bite-sized pieces for ease of eating, whether on a train, park bench or in the lunchroom. While this book provides many examples of popular proteins, experimentation is encouraged.

3. Vegetables

Vegetables most often appear in ekiben in the form of pickles. Even fried foods lose their crispness after packing and storing, so pickles provide a crunchy element that's difficult to preserve in other foods. They also add colour and contrast, and introduce acidity that refreshes the palate. Japan has an enormous range of pickled vegetables; feel free to make your own or use good-quality packaged varieties.

Another common preparation is ohitashi (page 28) – blanched vegetables marinated in dashi, which offers more flavour than plain blanched greens, while still remaining clean and restrained.



TSUKEMONO

PICKLES · 漬物

Pickles are an essential part of ekiben. As flavours mellow during travel and foods that were once crisp soften after packing, tsukemono restore vitality. They bring back contrast – crunch, brightness, bursts of acidity and salt – along with welcome flashes of colour that elevate the entire box.

You can buy ready-made pickles, or prepare your own at home. Both have their place, and many excellent ekiben rely on simple, familiar pickle varieties.

All of the pickles on this page are easily store-bought.



GARI

Thinly sliced ginger pickled in sweet vinegar; clean and refreshing

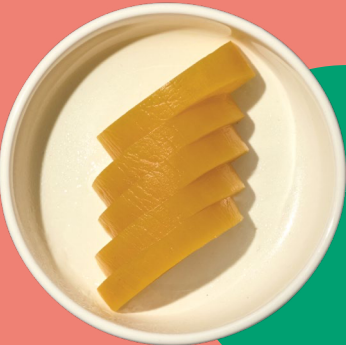


BENISHOGA

Julienned ginger pickled in umeboshi vinegar; crunchy and sharply tangy

TAKUAN

Sun-dried daikon pickled in rice bran; very crisp, with a vivid yellow colour. Takuan pairs well with almost any ekiben, despite its famously assertive aroma.



TAKANAZUKE

Salt-cured Japanese mustard greens, chopped and sometimes flavoured with chilli or mustard



EKIBEN



Recipes for amazu-zuke (sweet vinegar pickles, page 197), asazuke (light pickles, page 221) and shoyuzuke (soy-based pickles, page 164) appear throughout the book, offering simple ways to add contrast and character to your own bentos.

BASIC RECIPES



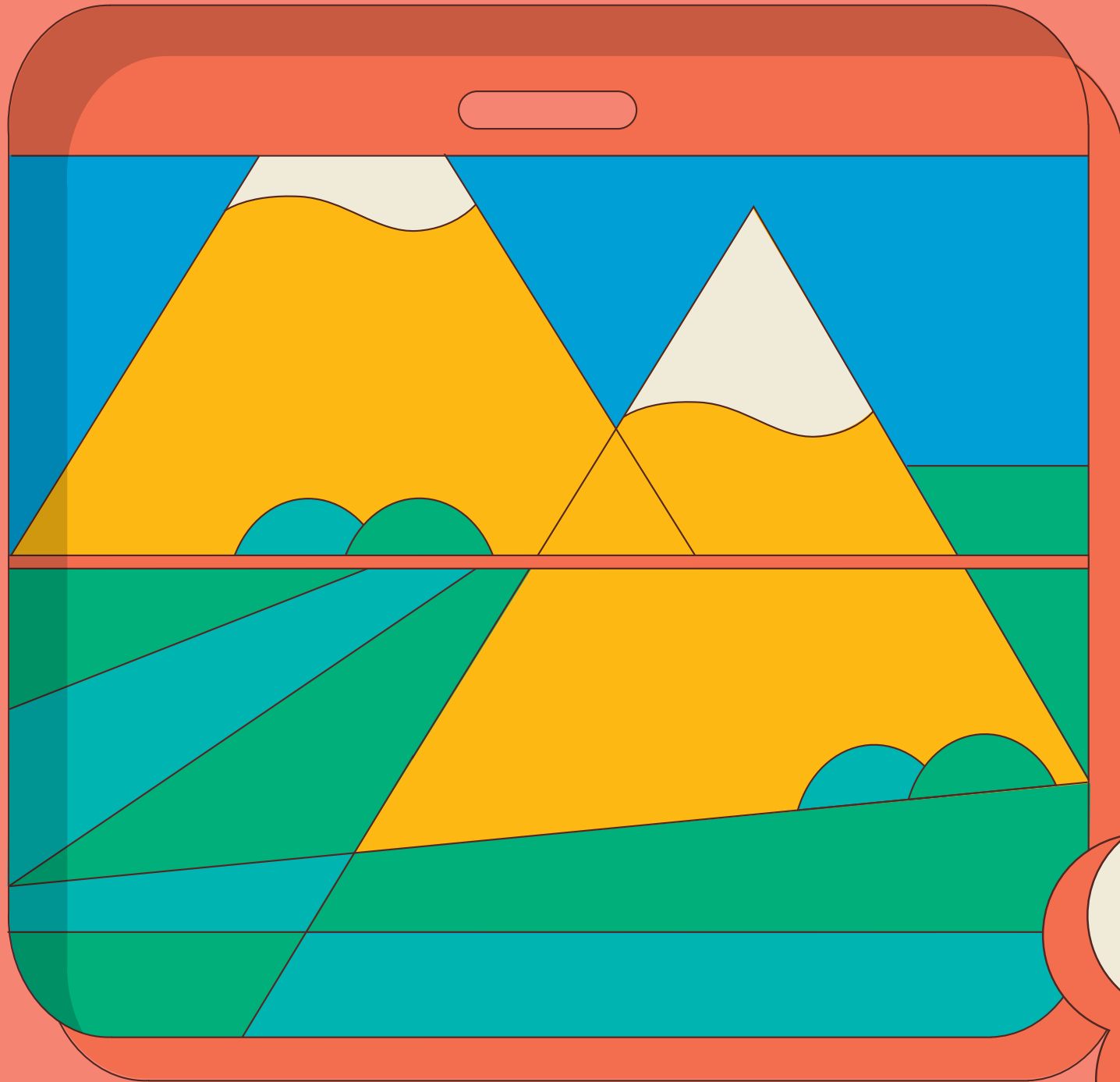
AOMORI

Known for its rugged coastline, Aomori sits at the northern tip of Honshu. In summer, the city hosts the Nebuta Festival, when towering illuminated floats parade through the streets, accompanied by traditional music, song and dance.

It is difficult to visit Aomori without encountering apples in some form. From cider to pies and jams, apples appear throughout the region's omiyage (souvenirs). The city's mascot, Ikube, is a blue fairy wearing an apple blossom hat – a playful nod to Aomori's name (which translates literally to 'blue-green forest') and its most famous crop.

Aomori and neighbouring Akita also produce some of Japan's best rice and it's a common gift from those travelling in the area. Local rice is an excellent accompaniment to the sweet shellfish and abundant mountain vegetables that come from this part of Japan.

THROUGH MOUNTAINS & FIELDS



MID JAPAN

•
From Niigata
to Himeji

The mountains loosen their grip, and the landscape begins to open. Rivers widen, fields flatten, and the train gathers speed. This is a stretch defined by movement and exchange – grain and vegetables flowing out of valleys, people and ideas moving steadily towards the big cities.

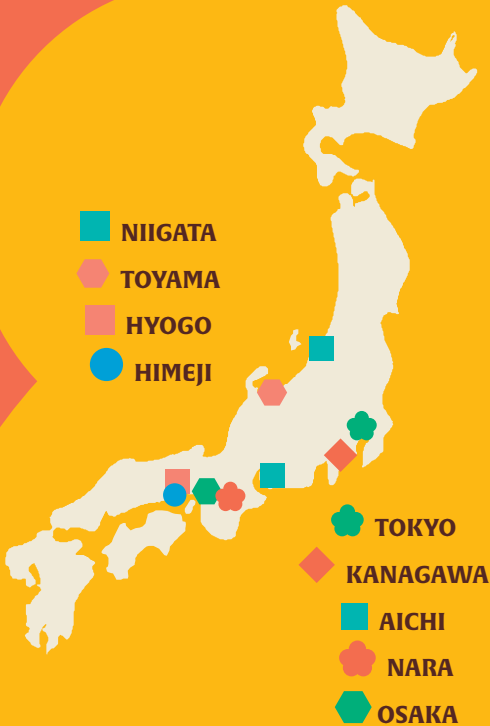
Niigata's rice fields give way to Toyama's coast and the long reach of the Hokuriku line, where seafood arrives fresh and early, and meals remain tethered to the day's catch. But the sense of distance begins to shorten. Stations come more frequently now, timetables tighten, and food becomes less about endurance and more about balance.

Before Tokyo appears, you feel it: the density of tracks, the layering of lines, the quiet choreography of transfers. Here, ekiben are no longer provisions against isolation but companions to motion. Ingredients from across the country converge – rice from the north, fish from distant coasts, pickles perfected elsewhere and shipped to the capital.

Yokohama carries the sea back into the picture, its port long open to outside influence. Western techniques, Chinese seasonings and a taste for novelty sit easily alongside older traditions. Bentos here feel cosmopolitan: sandwiches sit alongside shumai, flavours are less bound to a single place, reflecting a city shaped by arrival and departure over centuries.

As the train continues west, through Shizuoka and Aichi, fields reappear, factories edge closer to the tracks, and food becomes practical once more. Tea from Shizuoka, miso and eel from Aichi: flavours deepen and bolder, asserting identity amid constant movement.

Approaching the Kansai region, the tone shifts decisively. There is a confidence to the food as the train passes the old capitals of Kyoto and Nara, whose kitchens have fed Japan for centuries. The flavours are bold, generous and familiar, shaped equally by refinement and everyday appetite. It is a cuisine with a clear identity, formed where modernity and memory meet.



NIIGATA

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Masu No Sushi
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Chikin Bento
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AICHI

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Tanaka No
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Hanatemari
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Osaka Zushi
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Kobe Pork
Butameshi Bento
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Akashi Meibutsu
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HIMEJI

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SANDO サンド

In 1899 at Ofuna Station in Kamakura, the first sandwich ekiben was born. Its creator, Tomioka Shuzo, had been inspired by stories from his friend Kuroda Kiyotaka – statesman, traveller, and later Japan's second prime minister (1888–1889) – who spoke fondly of the sandwiches he encountered during journeys through Europe and America. At a time when Japan was modernising rapidly and Western culture held immense fascination, a sandwich ekiben was a novelty that immediately captured the public's imagination.

This early ekiben was modest: six neat sandwich fingers – two filled with cheese, two with ham and mustard, and two combining both fillings. Yet from this humble box, the Japanese sandwich, or sando, took root. Remarkably, the original Ofuna Station sandwich is still sold today. The combination of premium Kamakura ham with mustard, mild cheese and softly sweet bread remains every bit as satisfying now as it was more than a century ago.

The katsu sando, a sandwich featuring panko-crumbed cutlets, is said to have emerged in 1931 at the katsu restaurant Isen in Tokyo. The owner devised the sandwich so that nearby geisha could enjoy katsu without risking their makeup – a clever solution that transformed a hearty dish into something portable and discreet. Originally delicate and slim, katsu sando now range from elegant tea-sandwich proportions to thick, burger-sized meals.

In this section are recipes for three of Japan's most popular sando: a prawn (shrimp) katsu sando from Kinokuniya in Kyoto (unrelated to the bookstore chain), as well as a minced-meat katsu and a pork-loin katsu from Goshado in Kumamoto, a Western-style grill founded in 1946. A five-minute walk from Kumamoto Station, Grill Goshado is famous for the sauce that accompanies their steak, and is contained in both sando. The sauce recipe is the company's secret.

Ebi katsu sando (page 120) are packed with large pieces of bouncy prawns which have been bound together with a prawn and fish paste that adds depth, sweetness and rich umami while holding the cutlet together. It's one of my personal favourites.

Menchi katsu, or mince katsu (page 122), resembles a hamburger steak (page 52) that has been transformed into a cutlet. The panko crust absorbs the sauce beautifully, keeping the bread from becoming soggy while maintaining a juicy centre. It's an ingenious creation – and can be a brilliant way to use leftover hamburger mixture.

Finally, the tonkatsu sando (page 124), often simply called 'katsu sando,' features a straightforward combination of pork loin and katsu sauce. Its simplicity highlights the quality of the pork itself. When serving these cold, I prefer using thinner cuts (up to about 1.5 cm/½ in), as thicker pork cuts can firm up and become harder to bite when chilled.





MIYAZAKI

Set along Japan's southeastern edge, Miyazaki feels open and sunlit, a place where warmth shapes both landscape and attitude. At its centre is Miyazaki beef, one of Japan's most highly regarded wagyu regions. Raised with care on wide, green farmland, the beef is prized for its fine marbling and clean, sweet fat, and is usually served simply to let its quality speak without embellishment. Miyazaki and its neighbour, Kagoshima, are two of the top three largest wagyu producing prefectures, with Hokkaido completing the trio.

Mangoes – glowing orange and intensely sweet – round out the prefecture's image. Grown under careful conditions, they feel indulgent yet playful, a sunny counterpoint to the seriousness often associated with Japanese food culture.

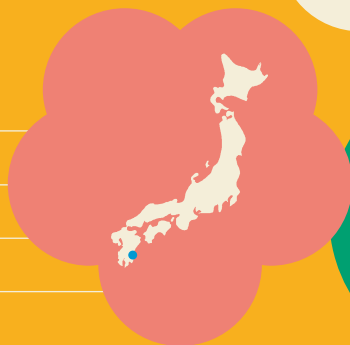
Beyond the table, Miyazaki's spiritual heart lies in Takachiho Gorge. Sheer basalt cliffs frame emerald water, a setting deeply tied to Shinto mythology and the story of the sun goddess Amaterasu. A day here is spent immersed in nature, drifting through the gorge as waterfalls cascade beside you. The same spirit appears at lunch when eating nagashi somen (flowing noodles) – chilled noodles that have been served gently flowing down water in a hollowed-out bamboo chute, to be caught by diners' chopsticks and dunked in a savoury broth. A meal that is simple and nourishing for body and soul.



MIYAZAKI PREFECTURE

Miyazaki Station, Miyazaki · 宮崎駅、宮崎県

31.9158° N, 131.4320° E



MIYAZAKI CHIKIN NANBAN BENTO

Miyazaki chicken nanban bento · 宮崎チキン南蛮弁当

Chicken karaage may be Japan's most famous fried chicken, but chicken nanban might be the best suited to bento. The term 'nanban' refers to dishes inspired by Portuguese traders, who introduced new ingredients and techniques to Japan after they became shipwrecked on Tanegashima, an island south of Miyazaki. Their influence comes from the method of deep-frying and the use of sugar and vinegar in cooking, both techniques that are used in this recipe.

Unlike karaage, chicken nanban isn't prized for crispness – a quality that's largely lost once packed. Instead, chicken nanban uses a softer egg-and-flour batter. After frying, the chicken is soaked briefly in a sweet vinegar sauce, which is absorbed by this thicker coating while remaining intact, keeping the chicken moist and flavourful even when cooled. It is then served topped with tartar sauce, creating a rich yet balanced dish that travels exceptionally well.

Miyazaki is widely considered the birthplace of chicken nanban. Two local restaurants claim its invention: Nao-chan, which serves large chicken cutlets dressed only in the sweet-and-sour sauce, and Ogura, whose version includes tartar sauce and has become the more widely recognised style. Both are excellent, and each reflects a different interpretation of the same idea.



Opening the lid

1. SAKURAJIMA CHICKEN NANBAN (PAGE 220)

Fried chicken in a soft egg-and-flour batter. Sakurajima, a small peninsula in southern Kyushu, is home to an active volcano and lends its name to this prized local chicken, known for its tenderness and juiciness. Try the chicken on its own before adding the tartar sauce (page 221).

2. NAMUL

Korean-style seasoned bean sprouts, included in this bento as a reflection of the island of Kyushu's proximity to Korea. The namul adds crunch and a light sesame-soy flavour that contrasts with the rich chicken.

3. DASHIMAKI TAMAGO (PAGE 26)

Made with Miyazaki's highly regarded eggs, this rolled omelette is vibrant yellow, softly textured and gently sweet.

4. TAKANA

Pickled mustard greens, pleasantly salty and assertive. Kyushu is the origin of Japanese takana, so it's only fitting it appears in this bento.

5. SAKURA ZUKE DAIKON

Turnip, pickled in umeboshi vinegar, adds brightness, acidity and a light pink colour. The vegetable dishes provide contrast in flavour and texture, keeping the bento lively.

CHICKEN NANBAN

SWEET AND SOUR FRIED CHICKEN ・ チキン南蛮

In this dish, the fried chicken is soaked briefly in a sweet and sour vinegar-based sauce, then topped generously with tartar sauce. It’s rich, comforting and unapologetically bold, reflecting a local preference for food that satisfies deeply.

- 2 tablespoons caster (superfine) sugar
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 4 boneless chicken thighs, skin on
- neutral oil, for deep-frying
- 1 egg
- 50 g (⅓ cup) plain (all-purpose) flour
- 100 g (3½ oz) potato starch
- tartar sauce (opposite), to serve (optional)

SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE

- 80 ml (⅓ cup) water
- 80 ml (⅓ cup) mirin
- 40 ml (1¼ fl oz) soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons caster (superfine) sugar
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and minced
- 1 dried red chilli, deseeded and finely sliced
- 20 ml (¾ fl oz) rice vinegar
- 20 ml (¾ fl oz) lemon juice

In a large bowl, whisk together the sugar, salt and 1 litre (4 cups) water until the sugar and salt dissolve. Submerge the chicken thighs in the brine, then cover and refrigerate for 1 hour, to season the chicken and make it juicier.

To make the sweet and sour sauce, combine the water, mirin, soy sauce, sugar, garlic and chilli in a small saucepan. Bring to a gentle simmer, stirring until the sugar dissolves. Remove from the heat, then stir in the vinegar and lemon juice. Set aside.

In a deep heavy-based saucepan, heat about 5 cm (2 in) of oil to 160°C (320°F).

In a bowl, whisk the egg and flour with 30 ml (1 fl oz) water until smooth. Place the potato starch on a separate tray.

Drain the chicken, discarding the brine. Pat the chicken dry using paper towel, then coat in the egg mixture.

Working one piece at a time, remove the chicken from the egg mixture, allowing any excess to drip off, and coat thoroughly in the potato starch. Gently lower the chicken into the oil, taking care not to overcrowd the pot.

Fry for 4 minutes, turning halfway, until the coating has set. Remove and drain on a wire rack.

Once all the chicken has been fried, increase the oil temperature to 180°C (350°F) and fry again, in batches as needed, for 2–3 minutes, until golden brown and cooked through. Drain well.

While still hot, coat the chicken lightly in the sweet and sour sauce.

Serve straight away, topped with the tartar sauce, if you wish, or allow to cool, then refrigerate and enjoy the next day.

The chicken nanban will keep for up to 3 days.

Serves 4

KYUURI NO ASAZUKE

LIGHT PICKLED CUCUMBER ・ きゅうりの浅漬け

This pickle recipe is called asazuke (meaning ‘light pickle’) because it will be ready to eat on the same day it was prepared. This is a simple and versatile pickle that is perfect for many types of thinly sliced vegetables: cucumber, carrot, turnips, radishes or cabbage all work well.

- 3 short cucumbers
- salt
- 3 cm (1¼ in) piece kombu
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon mirin

Wash the cucumbers, dry thoroughly and cut into 5 mm (¼ in) slices. Weigh the sliced cucumbers at this stage, then place into a small bowl or container and add 2 per cent salt. (For example, if the cucumber slices weigh 100 g/3½ oz, add 2 g/½ teaspoon salt.) Mix together.

Using scissors, cut the kombu into thin strips and add to the cucumber. Pour in the soy sauce and mirin and mix well.

Cover the bowl or container, then leave in the fridge for 3–12 hours. Shaking occasionally will speed up curing.

The pickle will keep in the fridge for up to 3 days.

Makes about 250 ml (1 cup)

TARTAR SAUCE

JAPANESE TARTAR SAUCE ・ タルタルソース

- 2 eggs
- 100 g (3½ oz) Japanese mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon soy sauce
- ½ teaspoon caster (superfine) sugar
- ½ teaspoon Japanese curry powder, or other mild curry powder
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons finely diced pickled cucumber (above), seeds removed, or cornichons
- 2 tablespoons baby capers in salt, rinsed
- 1 spring onion (scallion), finely sliced

Bring a saucepan of water to the boil. Add the eggs and boil for 10 minutes. Cool under running water, then peel and roughly chop.

In a bowl, mix together the mayonnaise, lemon juice, soy sauce, sugar, curry powder and pepper. Taste and adjust the seasoning if needed.

Fold in the chopped egg, cucumber, capers and spring onion. The sauce should be chunky, fresh and well balanced.

Use to top the chicken nanban (opposite).

The tartar will keep in the fridge for 1 day.