



# Kyaraben

Bringing Smiles to Children's Faces

Typically cute and nutritious *kyaraben*



**Kyaraben**, or “character *bento*,” are boxed lunches that have been decorated to resemble popular fictional characters and other creatures or things. Packing a cute lunch for a child is said to strengthen family bonds and prevent picky eating.

**KATO KYOKO**

“**C**HARACTER *bento*,” known as *kyaraben* for short, are boxed lunches containing food that has been arranged and decorated to resemble anime or game characters, mascots, teddy bears and other such cute things. Children will often eat food they don’t normally like if it has been presented in a fun, artistic way.

Maruo Tomomi is a food designer who shares

All photos: Courtesy of Maruo Tomomi



Maruo Tomomi leads a *kyaraben* workshop for children

her expertise in making *kyaraben* through food events and books. Known as the “*Kyarabenist*,” Maruo believes that “*kyaraben* are tools to communicate with children.”

“Creating a boxed lunch based on what children like and are interested in sends a message that says, ‘I care about you.’ For example, I recommend making a *kyaraben* based on a character or an impressive scene from a movie you watched together with your child.”

Maruo gave her eldest son a boxed lunch four days a week when he began going to kindergarten in 2004, and this was when she began making *kyaraben*. At that time, *kyaraben* were not common, but wanting her four-year-old son to be able to enjoy his meal time even at kindergarten, she went about making them through trial and error.

“I looked forward to my child happily coming back home with his empty lunch box,” she says.

Soon, as she became able to create *kyaraben* just how she imagined them, she began to get requests from mothers of her son’s friends who had seen her beautiful creations, asking her to teach them how to make *kyaraben*. So she started “the Obento-4Kids *kyaraben* workshop,” holding classes irregularly whenever she received requests through her blog. Nowadays, she receives many requests to hold *kyaraben*-making events from corporations and local governments who have seen her blog.

Three-dimensional *kyaraben* are very popular

lately, designed so that the character seems to jump out from the lunch box as the lid is opened. For example, animal ears, paws, noses, and other three-dimensional parts are expressed by using fried pasta and then fixed in place by sticking it in other ingredients. When it’s time to eat, the fried pasta will have become soft, taking in some of the moisture from the other ingredients, so there’s no worry of injuring the inside of the mouth as it mixes with the other ingredients.

Dried seaweed, cheese, ham and other ingredients are used for the patterns, and the design is stuck together and fixed with mayonnaise. It’s important to pack the food in so it is low enough that the ingredients don’t touch the lid and thus ruin the design.

Maruo states that, of course, in addition to the appearance, the most important thing is taste.

“I choose ingredients that taste good together, such as *kombu* seaweed and cheese with white rice.”

She is also careful to finish a *kyaraben* quickly while the ingredients are still fresh, keeping hygiene in mind. It’s important, she says, to be simple with the design and not worry so much about details, with preparations taking less than an hour at most.

Lately, interest in Japan’s *kyaraben* is increasing, with *kyaraben* workshops even included in tours of Japan for visitors from abroad. Both online and through other ways, Maruo hopes to support people who want to learn how to make *kyaraben* for their children and for personal enjoyment, too. **▼**