

## The Secret Ingredient of My Bento Box

*Ding dong...*

The chime sounds and it is lunch time. The date is October 31<sup>st</sup> and as I open the lid of my bento box, I see an eye covered with hair looking up at me, with five fingers creeping out of the rice, covered in vivid red blood. “Wow! That’s so cool! Everyone, look at her bento! How did your mom make that?” says my friend. It is easy. She used five sausages and cut them to make them look like five fingers, adding some ketchup to resemble blood. For the eye, she used some cheese and put a circle of seaweed on top, adding more seaweed around it to make it look like hair. However, none of this could be done without my mom’s effort, passion and flair.

My bento journey began when I was 7 years old. I had just started attending elementary school, but I always felt different because I could not speak Japanese well and my bento was not the stereotypical one that everyone had. I disliked school and I would always cry at home repeating the words, “Why am I different?” One day, when I was sobbing as usual, my mom comforted me and said, “Stop crying and look at me. I know that it is a tough time for you, but mom will work hard to cheer you up, so will you promise me to do your best at school as well? If we do this, we can get

through it. Let's believe in ourselves." It was this moment that my mom decided to take greater efforts with my school bento.

My mom is a Singaporean. She grew up in a country with renowned culinary culture famous for dishes such as chicken rice, *char siew* meat and noodles, *laksa*, and many more. It was common for students to have those meals for lunch in cafeterias at school, so she was not familiar with Japanese bento culture. Therefore, she started from scratch by reading cookery books and going to lessons. She sometimes made bento even on weekends and brushed up her skills through trial and error. Her efforts paid off the day I saw a bento filled with cute rice balls and side dishes. Even though it was not the best-looking bento, I still remember the ecstatic happiness I felt as I opened the lid. And thanks to this bento, I was able to start conversations with my friends and find my comfort zone at school. As my mom got more and more into making bento, so I gained the courage to take a step forward in many aspects of my life, especially socializing and speaking Japanese.

Nine years have passed and even to this day, my mom has not lost her passion for making lunch boxes and she is always 100 percent committed to her menus. Her bento boxes are filled with originality and creativity and she has even gotten involved with several bento clubs. This whole experience has taught me to be brave,

hard-working and passionate, even when I am in a foreign environment, because there will always be room for people with drive and enthusiasm who are willing to adapt and learn. My mother was unfamiliar with bento lunches and she was nervous about making them correctly at first. However, she made real efforts to adapt to this culinary culture and ended up finding a creative passion in it. I feel extremely fortunate to have been taught these life lessons by my mom and I hope I can be someone who can encourage and inspire others, as my mother encouraged and inspired me.

Currently, with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves in an environment we are not used to, full of uncertainty and anxiety, but I believe it is possible for us to unite and move forward. By changing fear to courage, and not allowing inexperience to discourage us, I believe we will be able to approach things more calmly and positively. Perhaps we can develop skills and find passions of our own, in spite of adversity, building connections with people in unexpected places along the way. (687 words)