

Five a Day



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Bento Picnic crafts modern, balanced meals in an ancient tradition.

Words by [Jessi Devenyns](#) Photos by [Ashley Haguewood](#)

Much like its cultural facets, Japanese cuisine is traditionally governed by five elements: tree, water, fire, metal, and earth. All five are necessary to craft a tasteful meal.

Long before there were nutritional facts and myplate.gov became the framework of how to compose a meal, Japanese tradition dictated a balanced approach to feeding oneself. The tree element translated to raw food, water stood in for steaming or boiling, fire indicated grilling or stovetop cooking, metal meant oven or deep fried, and earth transformed into fermented or pickled ingredients. It was a resourceful response to the necessity of nutrition in a world where living off the land was meant not as a lifestyle choice but merely survival.

"I realize when I check off each of those boxes it's impossible to make a meal that doesn't taste good and isn't good for you. And that's my ultimate goal," shares Leanne Valenti, the owner and chef at Bento Picnic. Although she trained as a plant-based chef in the United States, she found her calling when she began volunteering at Johnson's Backyard Garden and forged a friendship with a girl from Japan. "We would get all these vegetables, and growing up in rural Japan, she knew everything to do with them," remembers Leanne. It wasn't long before her friend was unable to further Leanne's education in Japanese cuisine and suggested she do a homestay at her parents' home south of Tokyo.

Taking her suggestion to heart, for six months Leanne lived with Japanese bakers and learned to integrate her Western training into Japanese cooking techniques as she composed three square meals a day. Beyond kitchen tricks, she says that the most important thing she learned was the virtue of balance. From sugar to pickles and carrots to sea greens, each ingredient earned its place in a dish. Even the way food was portioned and served was firmly rooted in the belief that equilibrium between all things results in less excess and better health.

Although intricate and ancient, the washoku technique she employs in her bento boxes is the epitome of balance because it incorporates five colors, five tastes, and five cooking techniques. "There's that metaphysical way of looking at composing a plate as well as a super practical one; in that, if you're using all the different cooking techniques, then you're not sitting down to a plate of fried food," she says.

Indeed, one need not fear a plate of fried food when they walk into Bento Picnic. True to her apprenticeship, Leanne creates edible tableaus that leave guests nourished and light. Stop in for breakfast and enjoy a smoothie bowl with a base of sweet potato puree whose mauve hue is complemented by the toasty brown of Leanne's homemade granola and is speckled with freeze-dried raspberries, shredded coconut, and rimmed with sliced banana.

Lunch and dinner are no less spectacular with options like Japanese curry which includes cauliflower, carrots, potatoes, and Fuku pickles on a bed of quinoa rice with a tomato salad or a soba noodle bento box with teriyaki glazed roasted chicken tossed with roasted vegetables, drizzled with ginger chimichurri and a tamagoyaki egg.

"The idea behind it all," Leanne explains, "is not just to nourish the body but also the soul by offering an opportunity to sit down, pause, and enjoy the elements of life one bite at a time."

Native Knowledge

Bento Picnic is also available at the Grab & Go kiosk at Austin Bouldering Project.

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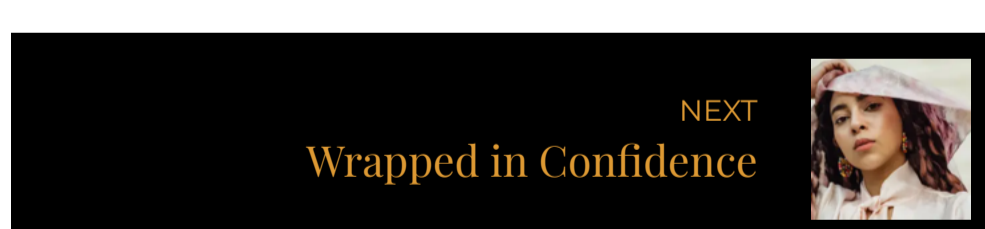


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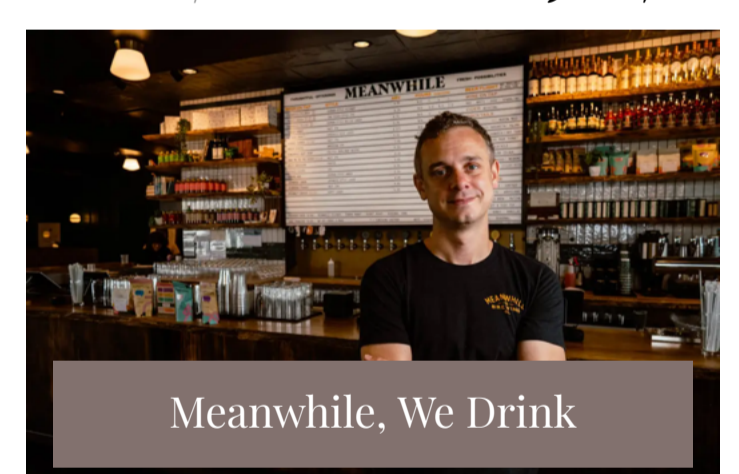
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