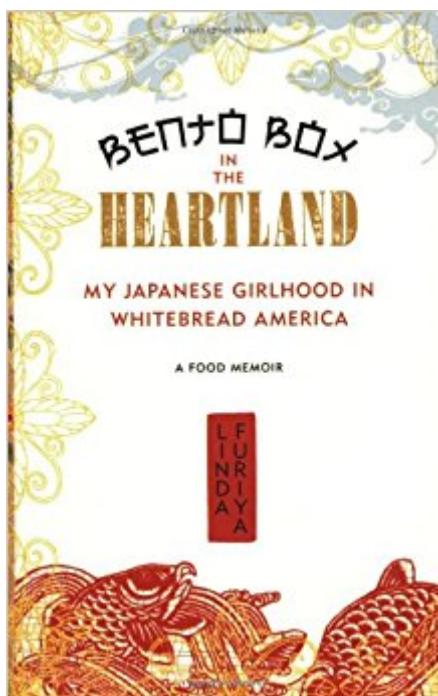


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# Bento Box In The Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood In Whitebread America



## Synopsis

While growing up in Versailles, an Indiana farm community, Linda Furiya tried to balance the outside world of Midwestern America with the Japanese traditions of her home life. As the only Asian family in a tiny township, Furiya's life revolved around Japanese food and the extraordinary lengths her parents went to in order to gather the ingredients needed to prepare it. As immigrants, her parents approached the challenges of living in America, and maintaining their Japanese diets, with optimism and gusto. Furiya, meanwhile, was acutely aware of how food set her apart from her peers: She spent her first day of school hiding in the girls' restroom, examining her rice balls and chopsticks, and longing for a Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwich. *Bento Box in the Heartland* is an insightful and reflective coming-of-age tale. Beautifully written, each chapter is accompanied by a family recipe of mouth-watering Japanese comfort food.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Furiya started eating lunches in the elementary school cafeteria, she was profoundly embarrassed by the rice balls her mom packed instead of a sandwich like all the other kids ate. She was already feeling self-conscious about being the only Japanese family in her 1960s Indiana hometown, and her parents' insistence on continuing to eat their native cuisine— they grew their own vegetables and drove for hours to visit big-city supermarkets that stocked Japanese imports— was frustrating because it intensified the differences between her and her classmates. But the exotic dishes were also a source of delight, and Furiya ends each chapter with

a recipe for one of her favorite meals. There is more to the story than food, though, and she describes the anger she feels when shopkeepers make fun of her father's accent, or the amazement when her mother takes her back to Japan, with the same vividness she applies to recreating the sensations of her first taste of wasabi. Though she continues to chafe against her parents' emotional reticence, partly inspired by their arranged marriage, Furiya also comes to appreciate the values they handed down to her, and it's this love that dominates her nicely told story. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In her syndicated newspaper columns, Furiya has written about Asian cooking as well as growing up in the only Japanese family in a small Indiana town. In this memoir-cum-cookbook, she expands on those subjects in chapters that close with family recipes. Food is always at the center of Furiya's stories, which begin with her grade-school realization that her bento-box lunch sets her apart from her 1960s peers. In a voice that's angry, yearning, and direct, she remembers the bewildering pull between American and Japanese culture, and her complex struggles to form a cohesive, proud cultural identity. The specifics are moving and vivid, as is Furiya's universal wonderment about who her parents are, how they ended up together, and what her own grown-up life will be: "Someday you will shoot and follow your arrow," her father tells her. "My arrow, it landed here." Pair this with Diana Abu-Jabar's beautiful *The Language of Baklava* (2005), another culinary memoir of growing up with immigrant parents. Gillian EngbergCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I love food memoirs, and I particularly enjoyed this one. It's a classic coming of age story: the author is a Japanese-American girl living in Indiana and dealing with the cultural identity questions that come from growing up Japanese in "whitebread America." Intertwined with the tale are the author's thoughts on food, and how it relates to her identity and connects her to her family's homeland. I loved the author's descriptions of food, and the book is filled with recipes from her childhood. I would race through every chapter just so I could get to the end and see another recipe. I've had the opportunity to try two of those recipes: Steamed Buns with Meat Filling (Nikuman) and Roast Pork Loin. The steamed buns were awesome. My partner said he could eat them morning, noon, and night. The roasted pork loin was also good. The author's stories were also interesting, and at times touching. She shares her experiences with racism, going to school in a mostly white public school and trying to "fit in", and the impact of her mother's depression on her life. Overall, if you love reading about food, especially Asian food, you will likely enjoy this book.

Overall tone of sadness/melancholy becomes a drag after a while. Did the author ever laugh out loud while growing up? Ever have any wild and crazy kid adventures? (Evidently not). The most interesting portions are the discussion of parents and grandparents while they were living in Japan - and when she travels to Japan with her mother. The author's own experiences growing up in the Midwest were surprising typical and a bit mundane, actually. This is better than her follow-up book about living abroad in China, and, overall, it is well written.

I adored this book and devoured it like delicious sushi! Even though I am not Japanese-American I felt so much of Linda's story rang true to me as I also grew up in the heartland during my early teens through college. It may not have been the "country" as it was a suburb of Cleveland; but there is a small town feeling in the mid-west that is unlike anywhere else in this country. It was difficult enough for me to adjust coming from the East Coast - never mind a family with roots in Japan!! especially identified with the cruelty of her classmates when she was young and then even later during a terrible occasion in high school that let her know no matter what - she was somehow, still on the outside, not accepted by her classmates. She must have felt very alone. There was so much pain that her parents endured, so much suffering and to watch the older, grown-up Linda identify this and come to terms with it with such eloquence and respect was heart-rending. Her characters are achingly real; I cared about them - even minor characters like her Grandmother and Aunt Jane. I cared about everyone who was a part of this experience, part of her experience. Linda never makes herself the hero of her own tale. In fact her harshest words are about herself and the regrets she has. What this book is ultimately is a stripped away volume of the truth of a life, of a time in a life. It is all laid bare and exposed with no saccharin, no filler, clean, beautiful, and natural, very much like the Japanese cuisine that is so much a part of the telling. As a passionate lover of Japanese food, the seamless integration of the role food played in her life and her family life makes this book a unique achievement. It's not a gushy foodie diatribe; but a rich first-person accounting of food as love.

Despite the slightly corny title, the book itself is very much written from the heart of the author. She gave me a glimpse into her experiences; what it felt like for her to be an American-born child of immigrants, with a mix of hatred for racism and xenophobia around her and an internalized frustration toward what made her, her family, and others like her different. It's also a great story about growing up in the late sixties and early seventies in America's heartland, about family, and

about food. (I don't think I finished a single chapter without getting hungry for Japanese food!)

Amazing story, all the time could not stop being hungry. Very moved by the way Linda dealt with racial tensions and cultural differences throughout her life. very inspiring.

This is a food memoir- every detail in every story is tied to the food the author grew up on, the foods of her parents' culture, the foods of celebrations and gatherings. The stories are cute, funny, and often invoked memories of my only childhood even though our food was dramatically different. This is a book I will gladly read again in the future. If you like food, you'll probably enjoy this book.

I love Japanese culture, especially the food, so I figured I wouldn't be disappointed. I absolutely wasn't! I am naturally drawn to memoirs, so I read this with much enjoyment and curiosity. Furiya is a captivating writer. This is definitely a re-readable book!

Loved this book! Enjoyed the authors insights and evaluation of life with her Japanese family. I highly recommend this book!

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