

# The Perfect *Omiyage* (Part 1)

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Japanese going overseas are famous for giving presents, but what makes the best *omiyage*, or souvenir from Japan? After living in this country for many years, I have developed my own ideas, which I would like to share with you. But first let's discuss what qualities an ideal gift should not have.

When I first came to Japan, I lived in Okayama prefecture and soon developed a taste for the local pottery, *bizen-yaki*. At first, I thought it looked primitive. There were no pretty designs or glazes and the surface was rough. But I came to enjoy its simplicity and the beauty of the warm brown earth shades. Was I developing a sense of *wabi-sabi*? I didn't know, but I really liked *bizen-yaki*.

For my first trip back to Canada, I saved and bought *bizen-yaki* to give family and friends, carefully selecting each wonderful piece of pottery. But my excitement turned into a headache when I started packing. The pieces were heavy and breakable. I had to wrap each one carefully with bubble wrap and sheets of newspaper so they took up too much space in my suitcase. There was no room for my clothes! But my problems had only just started.

I thought that everyone would love the heavy gifts that I had hauled from Japan. My mother likes roses so I gave her a beautiful vase with a long, thin neck perfect for a single rose. She opened the package slowly until she reached the treasure inside, looked a little puzzled then said, "Did your students make this?" I looked around her living room filled with nick-knacks: ornate Italian angels on the walls, dolls dressed in outfits from around the world, a Herend tea set with a leafy pattern on the table. Whatever made me think she would like her little vase?!

Unfortunately, each person that I gave my tasteful pottery to had a similar reaction and I soon realized what a poor choice my present from Japan was. Heavy, breakable, expensive — all the things a great *omiyage* should not be. Worst of all, most people thought my *bizen-yaki* could be from anywhere.

So what makes the perfect gift from Japan? Many of my friends take *furoshiki*, or wrapping cloths, to give people abroad. This seems like an excellent idea. A *furoshiki* is light and fits nicely into your suitcase. It cannot be broken like pottery. The designs are beautiful, especially the more colorful or traditional patterns. But there is one pitfall: the cost.

*Furoshiki* have a wide price range and some made of silk are very expensive. Japanese recognize the quality; however, this is not true for many foreigners. When they receive a *furoshiki*, North Americans do not use it to wrap things. I have seen *furoshiki* serve as scarves, table centers or made into sofa cushions. The *furoshiki* is appreciated, but it soon becomes dirty and needs to be cleaned... by tossing it into a washing machine! If you plan to give a *furoshiki* as a gift, definitely do not give one made of silk or a high quality material, such as Kaga-yuzen. An attractive cloth made of 100% polyester will be appreciated just as much, maybe even more so since it can survive laundry day.

The best presents should be light, unbreakable and inexpensive. They should give you a "feel" of the local culture which anyone can easily understand. Sometimes the best gifts are right under your nose. What we think of as ordinary, friends overseas may find exotic and very, very special. Next time, I will tell you about my most successful — and easy to prepare — gifts from Japan.