

## The Perfect *Omiyage* (Part 2)

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What makes a good *omiyage* for family and friends overseas? The most popular presents can be surprisingly simple. Before traveling, I always visit a local supermarket. *Sembei*, green tea or wasabi-flavored snacks are possibilities, but I head for the candy section. You may not realize the novelty of Japanese sweets, but children — and their parents — around the world do.

My two favorites are Bontan-ame and Kinoko-no-yama. Why are they good gifts? Mushroom-shaped Kinoko-no-yama taste great; but more importantly, with biscuit stems and chocolate caps they are cute. They can, however, cause problems. I once gave Kinoko-no-yama to a friend's 4 year-old daughter in Budapest, Hungary. Everyone wanted to taste these exotic treats so the box was passed around. When it returned to the little girl, there was only one mushroom left! She started to cry so I promised to send another box from Japan, which I did. Still, I wonder how many Kinoko-no-yama she got to eat before the adults found them ....

As for Bontan-ame, these are my 10-year-old nephew's choice since he uses them to tease his friends! First, he opens the box slowly, telling everyone how delicious these sweets taste. "They are soooo good ...." Then he gives his unsuspecting victims one cube each. He continues his praise. "These are the best candies in the world." As his friends become irritated, they try to remove the "plastic" wrapper stuck on the cube and have no idea that it is *oburato*, a kind of rice paper you eat. Before everyone throws away their candies in frustration, my nephew pops one into his mouth. What a shock! Many do not believe the wrapper dissolves, but once my nephew has eaten several, the others nervously try theirs — and you have a hit *omiyage*! Now when I visit my nephew, everyone wants a box of Bontan-ame for playing tricks on their own family and friends.

Another simple gift which Japan is famous for is origami. I recently took some students on a

study tour of Turkey. One young woman, Yukiko, brought origami paper, but wasn't sure if it would be useful. One day in a village near the city of Bursa, some women were selling homemade jams by the roadside. As we tasted samples, one woman asked where we came from and Yukiko said "Japan." This brought a friendly smile to the woman's face, but further conversation was difficult. Then Yukiko took out a sheet of origami paper and carefully folded a *tsuru*, or crane. Yukiko passed her little gift to the woman and made a new friend. As a crowd gathered to admire this "on-the-spot" present, the woman appeared with a gift for Yukiko, a pair of mittens she had knit!

At the end of our trip, a good-bye party was held with students in Istanbul. Once again, Yukiko took out her origami paper. Soon all of the young people were lined up, choosing favorite colors as she frantically folded. Later we calculated that Yukiko had folded over 50 *tsuru* and was the hit of the party.

Perhaps the simplest gift that I take overseas is a handful of 5-yen coins. Why are these popular *omiyage*? First, with *kanji* characters and a hole in the middle the coin looks exotic. Second, it tells of Japan's economic success: the stock of rice represents agriculture, the lines below it stand for the ocean and fisheries, and the cogs of a gear cleverly surrounding the hole in the center stand for industry. Best of all, the pronunciation, "go-en", also signifies "good luck" in Japan. People love to learn how Japanese carry a 5-yen coin in their purse to bring prosperity, including my aunt Gwen — whose name is pronounced like the coin!

In fact, an *omiyage* doesn't have to be fancy or expensive. The simplest gift is special if it is chosen with a little imagination and comes from the heart. A 5-yen coin, a *tsuru* made from origami paper, Kinoko-no-yama or Bontan-ame. You'll be surprised at how such common things in Japan become delightful treasures for people overseas.