

# Omiyage: Not Just a Souvenir

As you prepare for your departure to Japan, you're doubtlessly thinking about your future host family. While you won't be assigned a host family until your orientation in Tokyo, you can begin taking steps now to ensure that you make a good first impression. One way to do this is by thoughtfully selecting an *omiyage* (gift or souvenir). The guide below will help you to understand the cultural context of *omiyage*, the proper way of presenting one, and provide recommendations of effective gifts for your host family.

## Definition

Let's begin by breaking down the kanji.

- 土 *do/tsuchi* : dirt, earth, local
  - 土着 (*dochaku*) native, 土地 (*tochi*) land
- 産 *san/umareru*: to bear (a baby), produce, production, things that come from a certain land
  - 産物 (*sanbutsu*) production, 産業 (*sangyou*) industry, 生産 (*seisan*) production, お産 (*osan*) delivery

*Omiyage* is most often translated as “souvenir.” One reason for this is that the *kanji* components of *omiyage* quite literally mean “local product.” In addition, you are expected to purchase an *omiyage* for the people around you (friends, family, coworkers) whenever you travel. However, *omiyage* can also refer to a gift that is given when meeting someone for the first time or as an expression of gratitude. Simply put, an *omiyage* is a token offered to another person to show that you have good intentions. For this reason, it is essential that you have a suitable *omiyage* to present to your host family.

## Cultural Context

As with other forms of gift giving, *omiyage* are rooted in cultural understandings of social relations and the importance of reciprocity between people. Indeed, reciprocity is the cultural basis for gift giving in that the practice allows for psychological and social closeness between individuals. *Omiyage* and other gifts serve as ways to express gratitude and indebtedness in a way that connects people through time. Therefore, gifts are often reciprocated with gifts, which are then reciprocated with more gifts! It is a cycle through which people maintain social relations and continually recognize their interdependence with others.

As a home-stay guest you begin your relationship in a position of indebtedness because your host family will be caring for you over the next few months. Given this, presenting your host family with an *omiyage* from your home country symbolizes your recognition of the relationship you are about to enter, and signifies the sense of gratitude and reciprocity that is appropriate. That being said, don't be intimidated by the concept of "indebtedness" or feel obligated to by your family a pricey gift. It is simply helpful to be conscious of that dynamic as you navigate life with your host family.

In the context of souvenirs, the psychological and social function of an *omiyage* is to close the gap between the person who has had the unusual experience and those who have not. To step outside the home means to undergo some novel experience different from the ordinary domestic routine. Gifting an *omiyage* is an attempt to share that experience with those left at home, and recipients of *omiyage* have participated vicariously in that experience. Western souvenirs are different in that they aim to satisfy the self by serving as reminders of a trip.

As a general rule of thumb, there are four circumstances where purchasing *omiyage* is expected:

1. When meeting someone for the first time (for a significant reason, like establishing a business relationship)
2. As an apology/expression of gratitude when inconveniencing someone (e.g. you are thankful to your host family for opening their home to you)
3. To return a favor, or お返し (*okaeshi*)
4. When returning from a trip (so that others may share in your experience)

### But How Can I Buy Gifts for People I Don't Know?

When shopping for someone, we often strive to find "the perfect gift." However, given that you'll be meeting your host family for the first time, it is impossible to know what this would be. Do they like sweets, or are they health conscious? Are there young children in the household? Do they read English, or only Japanese? These questions and more can cause a lot of stress and self-doubt when selecting a gift.

You'll be glad to learn that your worries are unnecessary. The act of giving an *omiyage* is more important than the *omiyage* itself. Simply by participating in this custom, you are conveying to your host family that you appreciate them letting you into their home and guiding you through your time in Japan. It's natural for you to want to find something that suits your family's taste. From the Western perspective, the thoughtfulness of a present is inseparable from its significance. However, you should think of *omiyage* more as a symbol of good intentions than an actual gift.

## Proper *Omiyage* Etiquette

- 1. Wait a bit to present your gift.** Don't hand your gift to your family immediately upon meeting them. While it should definitely be given on the first day, it's best to wait until after you've been given a tour of the house and had time to settle in a bit. It's usually better to present the *omiyage* when the family is all together, but that's not always possible.
- 2. Don't be offended if your gift isn't opened immediately.** It's customary in America to open a gift upon receiving it. This shows appreciation and enthusiasm for the gift. In Japan, however, it's not uncommon for a gift to be set aside and opened later. Don't read too much into this. It doesn't mean your host family is uninterested in your gift; it's simply a difference in etiquette.
- 3. Insist that your gift be accepted.** Don't be thrown off if your family politely refuses your gift. This doesn't mean they don't want it. It's similar to the Western custom of telling someone "Oh, you didn't have to!" when receiving a gift. If you politely insist, your gift will be accepted.
- 4. Make it look good.** *Omiyage* must look good, with ornate boxes, sleek wrapping paper, and assorted decorations. The appearance of the *omiyage* is as important as the gift itself, and presenting a well-packaged gift is a thoughtful gesture that reflects well on you.
- 5. Don't be too extravagant.** You may feel pressured to make a good first impression on your host family and show your appreciation for their hospitality. While this intention is admirable, presenting your family with a pricey gift will only make them uncomfortable and feel obligated to return the gesture (even if they lack the means to do so). Try to find a gift that is nice enough to show you care, but modest enough not to cause a stir.
- 6. Don't think you're exempt.** Your host family will not expect you to understand all the subtleties of their culture, but that doesn't mean you're excused from participating in all Japanese customs. Taking the time to select an *omiyage* for your family shows that you're willing to go the extra mile and that you're committed to learning about their culture. In fact, you should continue observing this custom throughout the year. Whenever you leave Tokyo, you should take the time to select a small *omiyage* for your family.

## What to Say

When handing over your *omiyage*, you'll want to downplay its significance, even if you're proud of your gift and confident it will be well received. For example, one common expression for presenting a gift is:

- つまらない物ですが… (*tsumaranai mono desu ga...*)

This expression is rather formal and literally translates to "It's a boring thing, but..." This feigned humility is simple politeness, and your host family won't really think you intended to buy them a lackluster gift.

An alternative expression is:

- 大したものじゃないんですが… (*taishita mono janain desu ga...*)

This less formal phrase translates to "It's not much, but..." and follows the same principle of humility. You can follow either phrase with a simple どうぞ or just let the sentence trail off. It is also a good idea to memorize a brief description of your *omiyage* in Japanese (if it isn't self-explanatory).

## Quick Tips

- 1. Make it Shareable:** You will notice that a lot of Japanese treats come individually wrapped. That's because they're meant to be shared. Shareable *omiyage* are ideal for large groups (i.e. coworkers, classmates, and club members). A nice box of sweets is also a welcome gift for the family and may be shared together after a meal or with tea.
- 2. Seek out a Local Specialty, or 名物 (*Meibutsu*):** Locally famous items are popular gifts and serve as good conversation starters. Some students have brought merchandise from famous sports teams. Others have chosen souvenirs from local landmarks. It's important that this item is something unique to your town or region and that it's not something that can be easily found in Japan.
- 3. Bring a lot of little things.** Small gifts for neighbors, classmates, and coworkers (at cultural internships) are always appreciated. These can be magnets, pens, lanyards, or anything else featuring your school logo or a local landmark.
- 4. Don't wrap it until you arrive in Japan.** If your bag is searched by TSA, they are likely going to unwrap the package to see what's inside. If you manage to avoid this, the wrapping paper will still become worn and ripped by the time you arrive at your host

family's home. You can bring sheets of wrapping paper in your suitcase or buy them from a 100 Yen store in Tokyo.

- 5. Be mindful of space.** Japanese houses tend to be smaller than American ones, especially in Tokyo. Don't bring anything that will take up too much space or needs to be displayed (e.g. framed pictures, works of art).

## Gifts From Past Students

**Non-perishable Food:** Food is a classic choice for an *omiyage* because it is easily shared and doesn't add clutter to the home. Local goods (maple syrup, honey, jams, spices, teas) make unique gifts and can be enjoyed together as a family. If you bring typical American snacks or candies, you'll want to make sure that it's not something easily available in Japan like Kit-Kats.

(NOTE: You'll want to think real hard about what can survive in your checked luggage unscathed. A melted, smashed box of chocolates is a sad present no matter how tasty it is.)

**Sports Merchandise:** Baseball is especially popular in Japan, so some students have purchased hats and jerseys from local teams. If you live somewhere with a famous sports franchise, you should consider picking up a few trinkets with the team logo/colors.

**Collectibles:** Small pieces of local arts and crafts are good gifts for a household. For example, I live in Amish country and gave my family a small hand-sewn quilt. Others have presented their host mothers with locally made jewelry or garments (usually one-size-fits-all, such as scarves or socks).

(NOTE: It is important to be mindful of space, as Japanese homes tend to be on the small side, especially in Tokyo. Select something of modest size that can be easily stowed away.)

**Books:** Coffee table books – with an appropriate theme and lots of pictures – make good gifts. Past students have given their families books on America's national parks, famous artists and photographers, historical figures, or even locally famous animals (see: Lil Bub). Coffee table books are ideal because they are visually engaging and can be enjoyed regardless of your family's English level.

## For More Information

*FluentU: Japanese Language and Culture Blog:* <http://www.fluentu.com/blog/japanese/omiyage/>

*Maggie Sensei:* <http://maggiesensei.com/>