



Pretty useful: The range of flat doggy bags made by Tokyo-based Reacjapan Co. only need to be folded into shape to take home food that would otherwise be wasted. ERIKO ARITA PHOTOS

## WEEK 3

# Can doggy bags save the world?

**In Japan every year, leftovers are roughly the same as the world's annual total of food aid. And then there's the waste-disposal crisis . . .**

By ERIKO ARITA

Staff writer

It can be a bit embarrassing at a restaurant to say that you'd like to take your leftovers away with you. That's probably why people the world over often ask for the food to be put in a "doggy bag," whether or not they have a hungry pooch waiting at home. The cute expression also helps them to avoid looking mean.

Remarkably, though, the Japanese language never came up with an equivalent to describe a container for leftover food — and without there being a word for something, how can it exist?

That's why Tokyo-based nonprofit organization Doggy Bag Committee (DBC) has set out to popularize the English term. By encouraging diners in Japan to take their leftovers home, DBC plans to try and reduce the nation's annual 5-to-9 million-ton mountain of food left on people's plates or discarded by shops after its sell-by date.



Eco packs: Asako Hirai of the Doggy Bag Committee displays various reusable doggy bags made of plastic that even allow diners to take liquid leftovers home.

"A 'doggy bag' is not a bag in which to carry a dog in, nor is it one that's shaped like a dog," Yasuhiro Kubota, a DBC official, explained in all

seriousness as he addressed a Tokyo symposium on March 5. "It's a bag for putting leftover food in."

Kubota was followed at the podium by Keiichiro Yamamoto, DBC's director, who astounded the audience when he said that "the amount of food waste in Japan every year equals the amount of global food aid. It's nonsense." In fact, he said, the food aid supplied annually to 50 million people in developing countries worldwide amounts to just 7.4 million tons.

"It will obviously be difficult to eliminate all food waste solely through the use of doggy bags, but they can certainly be a great way to cut down on the amount of food we all waste," said Yamamoto, who founded DBC in Tokyo in March 2009.

According to Hironori Suzuki, an official in the Ministry of Agriculture's Food Action Nippon Committee, who also spoke at the symposium, Japan's food self-sufficiency was 41 percent in the 2008 fiscal year. He added that the ministry welcomes any efforts aimed at cutting down on wasted food as a means of restraining the nation's dependence on imports.

However, Japan's annual 5-to-9 million-ton mountain of pure food waste is the tip of an iceberg. According to ministry figures, the total amount of food-related waste generated here every year reaches around 19 million tons when the likes of bones and trimmings and spoiled vegetables are included. Of that total, only 5 million tons are recycled as fertilizers or feed, and the rest is burned, releasing greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

In an effort to cut the amount of wasted food, DBC's Yamamoto said he wants more people to start carrying reusable doggy bags with them for when they eat away from home. The ones the committee recommends are made by Reacjapan Co., a Tokyo-based plastic-goods manufacturer.

"Because the bag is made of one sheet, it doesn't leak liquids," Hiroko Sasaki, a company spokesperson explained, saying that the foldable box was designed using traditional origami techniques.

In a great breakthrough for both the maker and the cause, in January this year Ito-Yokado Co. supermarket chain began selling Reacjapan's doggy bags at its 107 stores across the country. One of the designs now on its shelves is a fancy pink-and-white box with a lacework pattern that's priced at ¥380.



Doggy friendly: A DBC notice for eateries to post telling customers they can take leftovers home.

Daisuke Miyakoshi, a household-goods buyer with Ito-Yokado, said the supermarket collaborated with Reacjapan and also with Saita, a magazine aimed at young mothers, to introduce the doggy bag.

"As the magazine's readers are mothers in their late 20s to 30s, I hope they will buy and use a doggy bag when they dine out with their families or go to home parties," Miyakoshi said.

Ryoko Inoue, a mother of two from Yokohama who this reporter questioned at random on a Tokyo street, was a perfect case in point. Admitting that she had never heard about doggy bags before, she was nonetheless enthusiastic about using them because, she said, "the children sometimes leave their meals unfinished in restaurants."

She explained that she usually tells her children, "If you are full, you have no choice but to leave the food," because most restaurants don't let us take the leftovers home. But I am afraid the children take it for granted they can just leave food for someone else to dispose of," she said. "I think using doggy bags will help me to teach my children the importance of food."

There seem to be many people thinking like Inoue, according to a DBC survey of 332 people in December 2009, which found that 90 percent were in favor of taking home leftover food from restaurants. The survey also found that 30 percent of the respondents knew that containers for leftovers are called doggy bags — an astonishing rise from just 1 percent who knew the term in a DBC survey in 2008.

That increasing awareness among users and potential users is, however, only half the battle in the doggy bag fight for acceptance. The other half centers on eateries themselves, which are often reluctant to cooperate with the campaign.

According to Hideyuki Kuribayashi, who set up the Saitama-based Doggybag Promotion Business Cooperatives in May 2009, his group has had far less response than he had expected.

The organization put banner adverts for doggy bags on the blogs of individual supporters in February, and though those sites attracted 50,000 hits, Kuribayashi said that only one restaurant responded positively.

"Many restaurants don't want their guests use to doggy bags because they think it may present a risk of food poisoning that would damage their business," Kuribayashi said.

Aware of this concern, the DBC has called for doggy-bag users to accept responsibility themselves for any food they take home. To that end, it has made user cards for people to sign and leave eatery staff, stating "I am taking leftovers on my own responsibility."

"You may wonder, 'Do I really have to do such a thing just to take my own leftovers home?' " the DBC's Yamamoto said. "But strange as it may seem, if many people come to think and act that way, it will spell success for our campaign."

According to the committee, about 200 restaurants across Japan have so far decided to support the group's aims by posting notices at the entrance informing customers they can take their leftovers home if they wish.

Meanwhile, in an extra effort to get both eateries and diners on side, the DBC has recently released guidelines for the taking home of leftovers.

Tomio Kobayashi, a nutritionist who is an associate professor at Chukyo Junior College in Gifu Prefecture, and who assisted in drawing up the guidelines, said people should put food in the container after the food becomes cold, because microbes propagate in food when it is warm. In particular, he suggested, "When you get home, put the food in the refrigerator and eat it at the earliest opportunity."

Sticking to its mission (like a dog with a bone), however, the DBC has also been extending its reach to hotels, which in Japan not only cater to their guests but also often host huge feasts and banquets for weddings and other ceremonies.

Nonetheless, despite approaching several hotels and asking them to allow guests to take leftovers home, the DBC has so far found only one — the Yokohama Kokusai Hotel — that has agreed to allow the use of doggy bags.

Explaining that the hotel has been promoting the use of doggy bags at buffet parties in the main hotel and its two branches in Yokohama and Tokyo since November, Toshihiko Sato, the general manager, said, "We have a huge amount of leftovers at parties. I thought it was such a waste to dispose of all that food our cooks had prepared with such care and efforts."

Sato and his staff decided on two categories of leftovers that guests would be allowed to take home: food that would still be tasty even if it had cooled; and food that didn't propagate microbes after 12 hours in tests conducted by the hotel, such as roast beef and fried noodles.

To further promote the use of doggy bags, the DBC's Yamamoto said the group is also seeking the cooperation of local authorities — many of which are running out of landfill space to bury incinerated garbage, including food waste.

In fiscal 2007, local-authority landfills in Japan had a total capacity of 122 million cu. meters — meaning, at the current rate of dumping, they will be full in fiscal 2022, according to the Environment Ministry.

In Chiba Prefecture in fiscal 2005, however, the prefectural government estimated that its landfills will be full in nine years. While the amount of garbage, including food waste, disposed of in the prefecture is declining due to recycling, the prefecture needs to strive further to reduce waste, said Masahiro Ikoma, vice chief of its Recycling and Waste Management Division.

Consequently, in December the prefecture started a campaign it has called Chiba Tabekiri Eco Style (Chiba Finish Your Dish Eco Style) to cut food waste by asking 280 restaurants in the prefecture to offer customers the option of smaller portions or allowing them to use doggy bags.

To test the effectiveness of the campaign, the prefecture has recently asked 100 students from Chiba University to try to use doggy bags at local restaurants and report their experiences to them, Ikoma said. He added, "We hope people can help to improve our mass-consumption society by changing their ideas on food."

It's clearly a vitally important, win-win campaign being fought out by something so humble as Japan's new wave of origami-inspired doggy bags. And wouldn't it be nice to also avoid the embarrassment of leaving perfectly good food on your plate, and instead take it home to enjoy later when you are not so full?

The Japan Times: Sunday, March 21, 2010  
(C) All rights reserved