Whether they follow the lead of classic Japanese Bento boxes, play on the popular American Lunchables brand or nod at today's charcuterie trend, packaged meal components for personal assembly are catching fire with K-12 customers.

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY
Thirty years ago, the way American parents packed children’s lunch boxes underwent a seismic shift. The year was 1988, and the bigwigs at deli meats giant Oscar Mayer sought a fresh strategy to revive the sluggish sales of bologna. The solution was the debut of the Lunchables line: a small compartmented box of mini slices of deli meats, cheese, crackers and a sweet. Kids went wild for these, options expanded—the company markets 30 varieties today—copycats popped up and the fervor for customizable mini meals has raged unabated ever since.

But why? If you've heard it once, you've heard it a million times: Kids love having control over their own food. Therefore, while a deconstructed pizza might not seem like much to adults, it offers young children some decision-making latitude. Top the flatbread with pizza sauce and eat the cheese with their fingers? Sure! Curl that flatbread into a taco and squirt the marinara on top? Why not? No one is stopping them.

Lunchables were hardly the first commercial foray into prepackaged, compartmented meals. For example, frozen TV dinners enjoyed a lengthy American heyday beginning in the 1950s. Three of the unique attractions of Lunchables were that they were refrigerated and not frozen, were positioned as an on-the-go meal option rather than a sit-down meal and were targeted specifically to kids (and their busy parents).

Other origin influences include the Japanese Bento box, which has been around for more than 1,000 years. It's a little bit different than a Lunchables; instead of cheese, crackers and a cookie, you're more likely to find rice, fish and pickled vegetables. The concept, though, is the same: It's an on-the-go option in which the menu components are separated into compartments, giving the diner control over how or whether to mix and match ingredients.

From the very beginning, innovative school nutrition operators began offering their own Lunchables alternatives in a clever effort to woo the lunchbox and brownbag crowd. Some longtime vendors in the K-12 market, such as E S Foods, got into the act early on, as well, marketing prepacked meal kits for breakfast, lunch, snacks, suppers, field trips, summer meals and more. For several years, the American Egg Board has offered up “recipes” for Protein Power Packs that feature a hardboiled egg, pairing it with such options as baby carrots, broccoli florets, a whole grain-rich bagel, tangerine, ranch dressing and grape jelly.
So, what's giving this decades-old approach new energy in schools today? One likely influence is how fast-casual brands have begun offering their own versions to attract the grab-and-go consumer who wants multiple ingredient components—often on the healthier side—in a single meal package as an alternative to an entrée with separate sides. One leading player is Starbucks, which currently markets more than a dozen varieties of “protein boxes,” “snack boxes” and “snack trays.” Commercial foodservice trends typically signal what’s going to be hot in the K-12 segment. Some trend-watchers also credit COVID with moving charcuterie boards from party platters to individual portions—and this super-hot trend, too, has become another source of inspiration.

While the trend was ramping up pre-pandemic, it has really taken off since. With many districts either opting for individually wrapped items or emphasizing grab-and-go convenience or both, more school meal program operators began flexing their culinary creativity and began curating their own versions of Lunchables-style meals.

For example, Melanie Gabriel, a cook at Wright Charter School, in Santa Rosa, Calif., shared that students don't eat lunch at school on half days—and, for the first five weeks of this year, kindergarteners had half-days every day! Each day they were sent home with a bag lunch featuring a sandwich. Although Gabriel and her colleague would try to vary it by using different types of bread (from croissants to ciabatta rolls) or changing the types of meat, “They were getting tired of sandwiches, so we thought, ‘What can we do differently?’ Kids like Lunchables, and charcuterie is really popular right now.”

With all the ingredients they needed on hand, the duo created a charcuterie-inspired cup filled with rolled up slices of deli meat, a hardboiled egg, cheese sticks, some type of fruit and/or vegetable—berries, grapes, cherry tomatoes, olives—and whole-grain crackers. “They loved it,” Gabriel recalls. “The teachers loved it. We got a lot of positive feedback and have now been doing it once a week.”

While Gabriel's school offers one type of lunch in this style each week, the school nutrition team at Assabet Valley (Mass.) Regional School District, ups the ante with multiple options of “Power Packs,” their chosen name for the grab-and-go entree. “Our Power Packs give our students so many different options,” shares Director of School Nutrition Dina Wiroll. “Hummus with flatbread and vegetables; yogurt with fruit and Chex cereal; a pizza pack—all meeting the reimbursable meal guidelines.” The yogurt,
fruit and cereal combination is by far the most popular option, she reports.

The Power Packs have particular appeal with student athletes, Wiroll adds, as they will purchase one for later in the day, as a nutritious and energizing snack source before practice or games. “My students also love them during regular service when they don’t want a hot entrée or prefer eating something lighter,” she explains. “The Power Pack checks off so many different boxes as an option for our students.”

In Texas, Tolar Independent School District’s Child Nutrition Director Debbie Riale and her team don’t just assemble a variety of food items in their “Rattler Boxes,” named for the school’s mascot. The meal kits also include a coloring sheet, crayons and handwritten words of encouragement right on the container. “We thought a lot of kids don’t get those ‘You are awesome,’ ‘Have a great day’ or ‘I’m so proud of you’ messages at home,” Riale shared. “The least we can do as cafeteria workers is show the students that they are awesome!” Handwriting the messages on the containers is quick and gives students an extra personal touch. The Rattler Boxes are offered once a week and are incredibly popular with pre-K to fourth-graders.

THE PROBLEM WITH PACKAGING

If you do a search for “Lunchables” or “Bento boxes” in one or more of the many Facebook school nutrition discussion groups, you’ll be inundated with posts and photos affirming the popularity of this menu trend, along with queries seeking best practice advice. Packaging has emerged as a common concern. The general consensus is that these meals work best in clear plastic—to use the visual appeal of the ingredients to help merchandise the menu item—clamshell containers with three to four compartments. But more operators are beginning to give voice to their dismay over the consequential increase in waste generated by these to-go items. Thread comments include: “I can’t wrap my head around the waste. No one says anything about all of the plastic being thrown away?” and “I can’t sleep at night because of one-use disposable plastics.”

Thankfully, there are eco-friendly solutions available from industry partners. For example, Fabri-Kal’s Greenware line offers a four-compartment clear snack box that’s made from plants and is 100% compostable.
in municipal or industrial facilities. They also make a plant fiber-blend hinged container, though it’s not transparent.

Sabrina Sailors-Bilski, Nutrition Services Director for Valders (Wis.) Area School District, made good on her commitment to sustainability by investing in reusable Bento containers. The cafeteria offers a variety of ingredient combinations, such as a cheese-sausage bites-whole-grain cracker package and a pizza kit with whole-grain flatbread, marinara and shredded cheese. While they’re incredibly popular with students, “It just sickened me how much stuff got wasted,” Sailors-Bilski comments. “I wanted to find a more sustainable way to get the kids everything they want, so I just ordered a ton of the [reusable] boxes and said, ‘This is how we’re going to do this.’” The students are required to return the boxes to the same place they would return reusable trays.

She admits that there was an upfront cost investment for the boxes, which she

### MIX AND MATCH MEAL COMPONENTS

What ingredients make good choices for K-12-appropriate versions of these grab-and-go meal options? Here are several that lend themselves to procurement, budget, correct portion size, ease of packaging assembly and popular flavor profiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEAT/MEAT ALTERNATE</th>
<th>GRAINS</th>
<th>FRUITS</th>
<th>VEGETABLES</th>
<th>DIPS/SAUCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheese sticks/shredded cheese (quartered)</td>
<td>Flatbread</td>
<td>Sliced apples</td>
<td>Baby carrots</td>
<td>Ranch dressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yogurt</td>
<td>Muffin</td>
<td>Grapes</td>
<td>Cucumber slices</td>
<td>Honey mustard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepperoni/turkey pepperoni slices</td>
<td>Tortillas, wedged</td>
<td>Raisins</td>
<td>Celery sticks</td>
<td>Marinara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower seeds</td>
<td>Crackers</td>
<td>Applesauce</td>
<td>Cherry tomatoes</td>
<td>Honey mustard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hummus</td>
<td>Goldfish® crackers</td>
<td>Orange slices</td>
<td>Bell pepper strips</td>
<td>Barbecue sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardboiled egg</td>
<td>Mini bagel</td>
<td>Mandarin oranges</td>
<td>Broccoli/cauliflower florets</td>
<td>Tzatziki sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nut butter/sunflower seed butter</td>
<td>Pretzels</td>
<td>Strawberries, halved or quartered</td>
<td>Sugar snap/snow peas</td>
<td>Salsa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottage cheese</td>
<td>Graham crackers</td>
<td>Blueberries</td>
<td>Edamame</td>
<td>Hot sauce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deli meat slices</td>
<td>Cereal</td>
<td>Melon cubes</td>
<td>Roasted chickpeas</td>
<td>Hummus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black beans</td>
<td>Tortilla chips</td>
<td>Watermelon balls</td>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
<td>Sour cream, lowfat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuna salad</td>
<td>Banana/pumpkin bread</td>
<td>Fruit cup</td>
<td>Celery sticks</td>
<td>Ranch dressing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Tried-and-True Combinations

Check out these winning lunch combinations that other cafeteria teams have found to be popular with their students. (Note: Some of these combinations will require additional components to create a reimbursable meal.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pizza Kit</th>
<th>Hummus Kit</th>
<th>Deli Kit</th>
<th>Nacho Kit</th>
<th>Charcuterie Kit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole grain-rich flatbread or breadstick, marinara sauce cup, shredded mozzarella cheese, pepperoni/turkey pepperoni</td>
<td>Hummus cup, cut vegetables, whole grain-rich flatbread triangle/chips</td>
<td>Sliced deli turkey/ham, whole grain-rich crackers, sliced vegetables, fruit</td>
<td>Whole-grain tortilla chips, nacho cheese cup, salsa cup, cut vegetables</td>
<td>Pepperoni/turkey pepperoni, cheese cubes, whole grain-rich crackers, grapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken/Tuna Salad Kit</td>
<td>Brunch Kit</td>
<td>PB&amp;J</td>
<td>Protein Kit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken/Tuna salad, whole grain-rich crackers, cut vegetables</td>
<td>Whole grain-rich mini bagel, cream cheese cup, sliced fruit, yogurt</td>
<td>Peanut butter/sunflower seed butter and jelly sandwich/Uncrustable, yogurt, cut vegetables</td>
<td>Hardboiled egg, string cheese, Greek yogurt, cut vegetables, fruit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**What's in a Name?**

“Lunchables” is trademarked, and “Bento box” might be confusing to students. What else can you call these grab-and-go meals? Here are some of the ultra-creative names SN came across on social media that you might consider using outright or adapting.

- Bistro Box
- Biteables
- Brunchmate
- Chatterbox
- Funables
- Kidables
- Lunch Buddies
- Lunchie Munchies
- Munchable
- Munchbox
- Munchmate
- Nosh & Nibbles
- Party Pack
- Paw Packs
- Picnic Pack
- Power Pack
- Protein Pack
- Snackables
- Yummables

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purchased from Cambro. “But I had money available in my budget. They'll pay for themselves within a couple of years, just by not having to buy that disposable product,” she asserts. “We’ll keep using them for years and years and years.”

**Let’s Do Lunch(ables)**

As these grab-and-go menu options were already trending pre-COVID, the return to in-school learning—and universal free meals—makes this a great time to innovate your cafeteria offerings. They tick off many boxes!

They send a message to students that your cafeteria operation is on par with commercial competitors. They offer portable flexibility for ease in serving at kiosks and other points of sale outside the cafeteria and meet the on-the-go consumption preferences of students. The prep requirements are minimal for numerous combinations and variations, giving the perception that you are offering more choices than a hot meal menu cycle might indicate. They lend themselves to simple but effective merchandising enhancements. Finally, they’re fun to create—and more fun to eat! SN+

*Kelsey Casselbury is School Nutrition’s Senior Editor.*
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