A PIECE OF THE WORLD, AT HOME

Souvenirs, when chosen with care, speak to who we are, how we travel and what we value. They're bridges between our home and our away—and between our then, our now and our next, guiding us towards the journeys that lie ahead. Here, four writers share the stories of objects that connect them most closely to places, people and passions.

Illustrations by Babeth Lafon

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Setting a Place

When a country's cuisine becomes your day-to-day comfort food, you find ways to carve out space for its kitchenware.

By Adam H. Graham

"BON VOYAGE, be careful, and please don't bring home any more Japanese dishware. We're out of space!" So said my husband before I boarded a 12-hour flight to Tokyo for my annual six-week trip to Japan.

"We can make space," I thought while settling into my window seat and envisioning my kitchen cupboards bulging with colourful chawanmushi cups, nabe pots and hashioki (chopstick rests).

I didn't plan to become a collector of Japanese kitchenware. It was a slow process that just happened. Like many

nomadic journalists, I gradually came to inhabit multiple countries. First I married a Swiss and relocated from New York City to Zurich. Around the same time, I started working in Japan quite a bit and fell in love with Japanese cooking. My visits to the country became longer and more frequent, and its cuisine became my comfort food.

Back in Switzerland, though, my search for Japanese food bore little fruit. Sure, there were decent sushi bars and ramen joints, but the Japanese soul food I'd discovered at izakayas and ryokan across Japan were, and still are, hard to find in Europe. I decided to learn to prepare these dishes myself, at home, but I had none of the tools for cooking them and none of the dishes for serving them. You can't make chawanmushi, savoury egg custard, without a lidded ceramic cup. Nabe (hot pot) needs a nabe pot. Soba noodles taste better on a zaru, a bamboo draining mat. Propriety demands hashioki. Sake is best experienced when it overflows from your cup into a boxlike cypress masu. My habit of hauling Japanese cookware across Siberia was born from a passion, but it evolved into a necessity.

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"So you're nomadic, an immigrant, a home cook and a collector of kitchenware?" a friend teasingly asked me. "You're so extra." Like a lot of immigrants, I find comfort in this plurality. I feel more at home in both of my adopted countries than I ever did in the United States. Minimalism and single-country dwelling aren't for me. Mention Marie Kondo or how you travel with carry-on only and you might hear my eyes roll.

The first piece I brought home from Japan was a samezaya-oroshi, a wasabi grater, given to me by my guide. This tiny, powerful tool—which fits in a shirt pocket and, like most Japanese cooking tools, is made entirely of natural materials—has a singular purpose. It inspired me to look for other highly specific utensils. Eventually, my visits to Japan grew more focused: I began to seek out cookware districts, like Tokyo's iconic Kappabashi Kitchen Town and Osaka's Sennichimae Doguyasuji. I killed time by scanning the kitchen aisles of 100-yen shops and hunting for regional pottery sold by train station vendors. Sashimi knives, suribachi (grooved mortars) and expensive cedar chopsticks designed by monks all found their way into my luggage over the years. Each piece became indispensable in my kitchen and a valuable connection to my Japan self.

"Don't you have everything by now?" my husband asked as I unpacked my bag piece by piece in our flat. "No," I answered. "I still need a tamagoyaki pan, a jubako bento box, a sukiyaki pan . . . " As he turned away, I could hear his eyes rolling. ■

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