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WHO MADE THAT?

The Chinese-Takeout Container Is Uniquely American



Jens Mortensen for The New York Times

By HILARY GREENBAUM and DANA RUBINSTEIN Published: January 13, 2012

The Chinese-takeout container, with its Japanese-influenced origami folds, is a uniquely American invention. On Nov. 13, 1894, in Chicago, the inventor Frederick Weeks Wilcox patented a version of what he called a "paper pail," which was a single piece of paper, creased into segments and folded into a (more or less) leakproof container secured with a dainty wire handle on top. The supportive folds on the outside, fastened with that same wire, created a flat interior surface over which food could slide smoothly onto a plate.

Wilcox's paper box seems to have been an advance in existing "oyster pail" technology. (The oyster pail, as described by Ernest Ingersoll in his 1880 book, "The Oyster Industry," was "a wooden receptacle with a locked cover used in

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transporting raw oysters.”) At any rate, the paper oyster pail and the incipient Chinese-food industry — which was beginning its meteoric rise in the early 20th century — seemed made for each other. “It’s nearly leakproof, and it’s disposable, and they’re really inexpensive,” says Michael Prince, who redesigned the Box O’ Joe Coffee carton for Dunkin’ Donuts. “Origami can make a really cool transport device.”

In the 1970s, a graphic designer (whose name, sadly, has been lost to history) working at the company now known as [Fold-Pak](#), put a pagoda on the side of the box and a

stylized “Thank you” on top. Both were printed in red, a color symbolic of good fortune in China, where oyster pails are little known. And thus was forged the great paradox: “The structure has come to represent the idea of Eastern cuisine in Western society even though this packaging is not used for food containment in Chinese culture,” says Scott Chapps, designer of packaging for Help Remedies. Or, as David Federico, marketing manager for Fold-Pak, put it, “We don’t sell them in China.”

Today Fold-Pak makes oyster pails in much the same way Wilcox suggested, albeit using solid-bleached-sulfate paperboard with a polycoating on the inside for more grease- and leak-resistance. The company has also made adjustments for modern-day behaviors: it offers microwave-safe Chinese-food cartons that use glue instead of wire and nondyed, environmentally friendly containers. It’s a growing market, Federico says. But the traditional takeout container doesn’t seem bound for extinction. “In America, if you just drew an icon of a box, people would understand exactly what it is,” Prince said. “That’s a lot of power.”

**I’LL HAVE A WORK OF ART, TO GO**

*In 2009, the Brevard Art Museum (now the Foosaner Art Museum) in Melbourne, Fla., held “Take Out,” a 186-piece exhibit in which artists were asked to turn a takeout container into, well, art. Jackie Borsanyi, the show’s curator, explains:*

**What inspired this?** I was brainstorming with the museum director over lunch, and the containers were there. The associations were quick.

**Your logic?** We were trying to come up with an idea for an exhibition that was very democratic. The takeout container served as a common denominator.

**Was the container inspirational?** Each artist responded differently. Some burned holes in the box. Others used it as a container not relating to food.

**Did any stand out?** One was made out of antacids — a response to Chinese food. One woman made an armadillo out of it.

**Did you see the container differently after the show?** Containers are always intriguing — something that can hide things within.

**Did you see any ties between the containers in your show and contemporary art?** Somebody did a minimalist piece, and I guess you can connect that to Donald Judd.

**Do you eat a lot of Chinese food?** I order Chinese food a lot. It’s funny that only the rice comes in that container and food comes in another.



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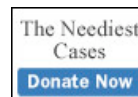


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A version of this article appeared in print on January 15, 2012, on page MM20 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Who Made That? (Chinese-Takeout Container).

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**Leslie** - Berlin

This is odd. My father says he and his siblings used to take these boxes apart and make toys out of the wire and cardboard... in Taiwan, in the 1950's. So I'm not sure it's true that these boxes are not used in Asia.

Jan. 15, 2012 at 11:51 a.m.

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**Free Bear** - NY

Never pay attention to it until now. It is truly a smart, practical invention.

Jan. 15, 2012 at 11:51 a.m.

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**Palladia1** - Waynesburg, PA

Back in the Fifties, in a town which had not a single Chinese restaurant, those containers were used for transporting goldfish people bought at five-and-dime stores. I plopped the fish into them, and bought a few tht way, myself.

Jan. 15, 2012 at 11:50 a.m.

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**Ellen** - Boston

I've been wondering about the shiny lining of the paper take-out containers...does it contain BPA? Many Chinese restaurants now use plastic containers for take out instead of paper. The plastic containers can at least be recycled, but I'm concerned about health risks associated with hot food leaching BPA from plastic. Yet I'm not sure the paper is any safer.

Jan. 15, 2012 at 11:50 a.m.

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