

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

The Joy of Bento

Food plays a significant part in Japanese culture and a very important aspect of food is the exquisite way a meal is presented. Gorgeous assorted and specifically designed plates, dishes and bowls are created to enhance the dining experience. And packed lunches are included in this tradition.

Bento is the Japanese word for lunchbox, but it seems to cover both the meal and the box it's packed in. Ready-to-eat *bentos* are sold at stores, train stations and even on the street. As a ready-meal, they are extremely tasty and are heated on the premises if required. More often though, they are lunches packed at home for the worker or children.

Containers for the ready-meal version are made from disposable plastic, or occasionally wood. For the home-made *bento* however, the choice is astounding. Most are tiered boxes so the meal can be divided into two or three parts, usually rectangular, oval or circular in shape, although animal shapes are popular too. The main compartment will contain rice and the others filled with standard fare such as vegetables, fish, or eggs.

For children, good quality plastic *bentos* with cute character decorations are popular, while adults favour stunning lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl and many have a special compartment to hold chopsticks.

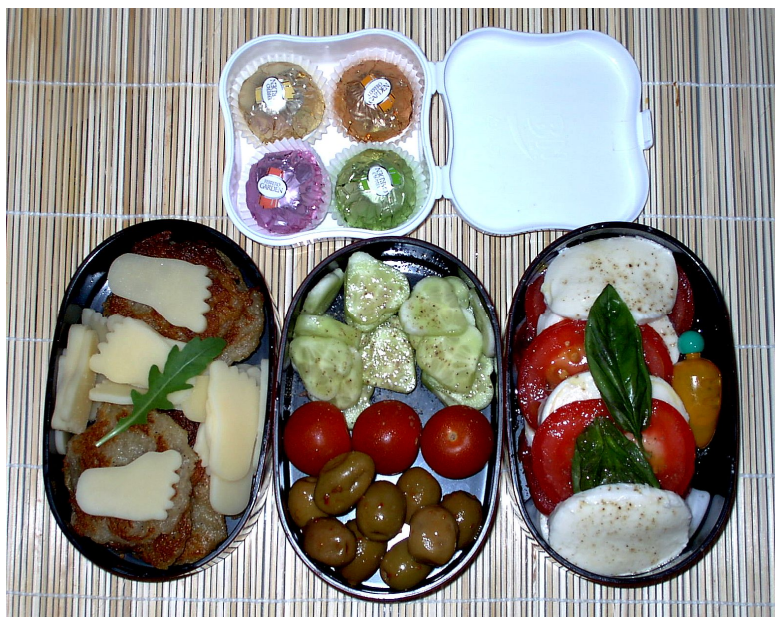
Packing a *bento* is often viewed as an art-form and women spend a great deal of time and effort creating a visually attractive, nutritionally perfect meal for their loved ones. The idea is to make the food as appealing as possible, using vivid colours and inventive design. The box is packed as full as possible so the food doesn't get damaged when transported. This isn't as tricky as it sounds as *bentos* are small compared the lunchboxes we are used to in the UK.



Many mothers arise at dawn to craft elaborate masterpieces for their children to show off at school. Whether the child appreciates the amount of work that goes into creating their lunch is not noted. However, there are official contests where *bento* artists compete with each other for the most elaborate and imaginative ways of presenting the *bento* contents so some recognition can be achieved.

Cookware shops abound with rice moulds to make cute shapes such as rabbits, teddies and popular character faces. You can buy ready-cut features made from dried seaweed to decorate the moulded rice or cutters to stamp out your own shapes. Along with these best-sellers are plastic devices to shape a frankfurter into a crab or spaceship; moulds to make square hardboiled eggs, and numerous sharp cutters to turn carrots and cucumbers into flowers, stars, leaves and pretty much any design you desire. Then you need to have miniscule pots to hold mayonnaise, tiny bottles for soy sauce and special shakers to hold the rice seasoning, *furikake*.

Now, I have no intention of getting up ridiculously early every day to create a fancy *bento* for my daughter, but prompted by some friends, I bought a few bits and pieces as an experiment. So now I have rice moulds, some clever little tubes to make rice balls and a little *furikake* shaker shaped like a chick. Although more time consuming than making a sandwich, the result was a great success. For the first time, there was a completely empty lunchbox at the end of school! So maybe there is something to be gained from making food ultra-attractive and therefore more appealing to a young, fussy-eater. You can buy bento boxes and most accoutrements on eBay, and quick search on the internet will give you lots of ideas for creating your own Japanese style lunch box.



A three-tier bento, showing the separate compartments