

## **Obento: Art in a Lunch Box**

by Teresa V. Mitchum, 2016

At school in Japan, children bring a boxed lunch known as obento. In this informational text, Teresa V. Mitchum provides information about what lunchtime looks like for children in Japan.



"Kids eat their obento at a classroom table." by Teresa V. Mitchum is licensed under Used with permission.

### **What's so much fun about lunchtime in Japan?**

Japanese kids eat a good-looking lunch. They carry lunches to school in bento boxes. Their boxed lunch is called *obento* (oh-BEN-toe).

Bento boxes are small containers made out of plastic, wood, or metal. Sometimes they have sections to separate the food.

The bento boxes are usually decorated with cartoon characters, animals, or flowers. They have matching chopsticks or silverware containers, bags, cups, and lunch mats.

### **Pretty Food**

Inside the bento box, the obento is just as colorful. Many Japanese people believe that all food should taste good and look pretty. There is a Japanese saying: Food should be made so that you could eat it with your eyes.

Japanese parents often choose foods with different colors, textures, shapes, and tastes. Then they arrange the food in the bento boxes.

Mrs. Sato, who lives in Tokyo, makes obento for her son Koki. She says, "I want Koki's obento to be colorful. I try to include foods that are red, green, yellow, and brown. I make the obento look nice but also make sure it's healthy."

What do kids eat as their obento? Rice and side dishes.

Koki likes a layer of rice in the bottom of his bento box. Sometimes Mrs. Sato puts *shogayaki*, stir-fried pork, on top of the rice. Sometimes she sprinkles it with *furikake*. These are sprinkles made from *nori* (seaweed) or dried fish. Many children in Japan love them.

Giri, another boy, brings *onigiri*. These are sticky rice balls or triangles wrapped in dried, pressed seaweed. Sometimes the onigiri have a pickled plum, small bits of cooked salmon, or flaked fish in the middle.

The side dishes include pickled, boiled, or steamed vegetables; omelets made with salt and sugar; small sausages; fish; or meat. *Umeboshi* (pickled Japanese apricot) is a treat. The dessert is fresh fruit.

### **Before You Eat**

Obento time is special. First, children wash their hands and gargle with a kind of mouthwash. Then they get their obento from their bags. In the winter, the *sensei* (teacher) may take their obento out of a warmer for them.

Kids put their obento, chopsticks, and cups on their lunch mats. They sit at classroom tables.

Before eating, they sing a fun song about obento:

*We are so happy because it's obento time.  
Our hands are washed and clean.  
Everybody is here now,  
So let's say, "Thank you  
for the food, Mommy  
and Daddy."*

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