

The evolution of Character 'Bento' Lunch

– Chara-ben –

***Bento*, the customary Japanese packed lunch, is a trademark of Japanese food culture. A traditional lunch for hundreds of years, its evolution has been quite unlike its counterparts in other countries. Recently, *Bento* has evolved rapidly among mothers with preschool-aged children, whose efforts have made *Bento* something approximating fine art. So what, exactly, has happened to Japan's packed lunch?**

Bento is a portable lunch packaged in an attractive box. In contrast to traditional Aussie lunchbox fare, *Bento* places considerable weight on nutritional balance and visual appeal. *Bento* is usually a full meal consisting of a staple of white rice, with fish or meat as a main component, side servings of vegetables, and a dessert such as fruit. This colourful and appealing meal is packaged in a specific box designed for *Bento*, known as *Bento Bako*.

Bento is eaten by people throughout Japanese society, from kindergarten and school children, to working people. But preschoolers are a notoriously fickle group, with temporary likes and dislikes and a tendency to leave their veggies, and to get so absorbed in playing that they neglect to eat properly. The increasingly popular *Chara-ben* has recently emerged as a fun way to coax little children like this to eat all of their lunch.

Chara-ben, an abbreviation for 'Character Bento', uses lunch ingredients to depict television and comic book characters. With the dexterous use of such things as biscuit moulds, scissors and pins, designs are created from fried eggs, dried seaweed, sausages, mini tomatoes and more, to produce a lunch representing the faces of popular characters.

It's common knowledge that, in Japan, the culture of anime permeates the society. It is not unusual in raising children, who are still unfamiliar with the rules of society, to use goods decorated with anime characters. For example, for children who dislike brushing their teeth, there are character toothbrushes to encourage good dental hygiene. Character goods appealing to children are very common and, to date, preschoolers' lunch boxes and chopsticks have frequently portrayed well-loved characters. However, the practice of making character designs from food, to help children enjoy their lunch even more and,



The BANDAI character *Raburicchi* reproduced in rice, egg, cheese, and ham.

A large range of goods are sold to complement *Chara-ben* (BANDAI's *Tamagotchi Balan set*)



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ideally, eat everything, is a much more recent phenomenon.

It appears that the *Chara-ben* boom started back in 2005 with one housewife who blogged her personal creations. Her magnificent lunchbox art was met with a huge response. Housewives nationwide started making their own *Chara-ben*, inspired by the blog. They began to purchase materials required to easily fashion food-characters, and kitchens became packed with tools of the trade; pre-cut eyes and mouths made from dried seaweed, cookie cutters to make face-shaped rice balls, and specialist cook books on the fundamentals of *Chara-ben*.

In recent times, completed *Chara-ben* has been seized upon as a kind of artwork, pictures of which are uploaded by an increasing number of bloggers. In February 2010, big name toymaker BANDAI introduced the *Tamagotchi-chara-ben Contest*, as a means of encouraging people to have fun with *Chara-ben* in their daily lives. A total of 354 applications were received from around the nation.

Mum being up early to make the children's lunches is a familiar scene in Japanese households. Making lunches in the morning is a sombre hour of labour, involving rising early to cook and pack a nutritious and appealing lunch - and *Chara-ben* is particularly time consuming. However, for mothers, having their children actually eat their greens, and uploading their *Bento* creations (and thus achieving the admiration of strangers), makes the early morning chore actively enjoyable.

With enjoyment now being a part of children's daily meals, and with mothers getting the pleasure of positive feedback from children and strangers alike, there are benefits for both parties. Perhaps in the future we will see *Chara-ben* firmly entrenched as a cultural icon of Japan as one means of communication for mothers dealing with the daily tasks of child rearing.

Chara-ben is a registered trademark of BANDAI.

Photo and Information: **BANDAI Corporation.**