

Yusanbako (Wooden Lunch Boxes)

Three-tiered, lacquered, wooden lunch boxes, known as *yusanbako*, were a staple of childhood in Tokushima. Children carried the colorful lunch boxes when they went to the fields, the mountains, or the beach with their friends. Although *yusanbako* fell out of daily use from the 1960s, recent efforts by researchers and craftspeople have resulted in a renewed interest in the custom.

A Childhood Tradition

The *yusanbako* is a set of three small, square-shaped stacking trays fit into a boxed frame. A vertically sliding lid keeps the trays securely in place. When it is time to eat, the lid is pulled up and out to reveal the drawers inside. The whole is carried by a handle set on the top.

Traditionally, the bottom tier of the *yusanbako* would be filled with some form of rice, such as sushi, or sweet and tangy *inarizushi*—pockets of fried tofu stuffed with rice. The middle tray would hold simmered vegetables, while the top was reserved for something sweet. One treat especially popular among children in Tokushima was *uiro*, a steamed cake made of rice flour and sugar.

The *yusanbako* tradition has roots in Tokushima's agricultural heritage. At a time when much of the population lived in small farming communities, daily life revolved around the seasons. The coming of spring was celebrated with a rare day off, when villagers would enjoy a picnic together outdoors.

The design of *yusanbako* developed from larger three-tiered boxes designed to carry food for an entire family. Smaller versions for children probably appeared toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1868). *Yusanbako* with painted designs grew in popularity during the Meiji era (1868–1912). In time, they came to be associated with Hinamatsuri, or the Doll's Festival.

In Tokushima, both girls and boys would gather with friends for a picnic lunch to mark this rite of spring. Many older residents still have fond childhood memories of their *yusanbako* and those festive excursions with schoolmates. Typically, each child of elementary school age had his or her own box that would be brought out yearly just for this occasion.

As families became smaller and more people moved from agriculture to other kinds of work in the days of economic expansion after World War II, demand for *yusanbako* declined, as did the number of craftspeople making them.

Yusanbako Today

The publication of a 2006 book by Miyake Masahiro, an academic and researcher with an interest in food culture, helped to revive the tradition of *yusanbako*. He collaborated with local craftspeople to come up with a simpler, less expensive alternative to the

original version. *Yusanbako* painting workshops have since become a popular activity with families and school groups, as well as visitors who want a one-of-a-kind souvenir from Tokushima.

The traditional lacquered *yusanbako* are also available, and may be purchased as a special gift for a new bride or to celebrate a baby's birth. People sometimes use the lunch boxes for decorative purposes, or to store and display things such as confectionery or accessories. In addition, groups with an interest in history or food culture hold lectures or events to promote appreciation of this aspect of childhood culture in Tokushima.