



BOXING CLEVER

Forget Pret: Japanese bento is a super-healthy, cheap and easy way to have lunch, says Stephanie Mann

As I faced 2011, with all its promises and resolutions, I had only one: to make my lunches more interesting. Luckily for me, my search ended when I came across www.justbento.com and a whole new nommy world opened up.

Bento is a Japanese way of packing a balanced lunch, using rice, fish, meat and vegetables, contained in a box. Although you can buy bento in Japan in the same way you could grab a sandwich here, the care and attention to bento preparation can vary from very simple to as intricate as you like. The process of preparation and choice of food is taken very seriously—and competitively—by some.

Makiko Itoh, author of *The Just Bento Cookbook*, a spin-off from the site, says: "Bentos are good because they are an easy way to practise portion control. Also the box makes it a bit easier to see how nutritionally balanced your meal is. Bringing an appetising lunch from home also helps to save money."

As someone who could burn a house down making toast, I have found that finding simple, healthy bento recipes has been easy. I have also found that having a little box of varied 'parts' is something I look forward to at lunchtime; something I can't say about the times when I know I have a cheese and pickle sarnie waiting for me. I am also much more inclined to eat healthily, because of all that thinking and preparing involved.

Resources:
www.justbento.com, www.japancentre.com, <http://casabento.com>

Maki Itoh's Pan Fried Lemon Chicken Nuggets

These tender, lemony white meat nuggets are very quick to make, good hot or cold, and versatile. They are pan fried, not deep-fried, so they are not crispy on the outside, but are delicious nevertheless. You can use them in a rice-based bento, with noodles, or as a sandwich filling. They can be eaten as-is with a cocktail stick or the fingers too.

This makes about 15-16 nuggets. Cooking time: about 10 minutes.

300g / about 10.5 oz. boneless, skinless chicken breast
 Salt & pepper
 Cornstarch
 One lemon
 Soy sauce
 1-2 tbs olive oil

Blot the moisture off the chicken breast with paper towels and cut into bite-sized pieces. Put into a bowl and season with salt (go light on the salt, especially if you plan to drizzle on some soy sauce later), pepper, and the juice of half a lemon and toss well. Leave to marinate for a couple of minutes, then drain off the excess moisture.

In the meantime, heat up a large frying pan with the olive oil.

Coat the chicken pieces well with cornstarch. Lay each piece flat in the pan, taking care they don't overlap. Let them cook over high heat until crispy and golden brown (about 3-4 minutes), then turn over and cook for an additional 2-3 minutes until browned on the other side. Optionally, drizzle a tiny amount of soy sauce over the chicken to give them a caramelised colour. Finish off by squeezing the juice from the other half of the lemon over it all.

Take off the heat, and let cool before packing into your bento box. If you want it even more lemony, pack a lemon wedge alongside the nuggets.

Variations: Try using white wine, sake, mirin or Masala wine instead of the lemon juice, or in addition to it.