

Mochi Tsuki

(Sweet Rice Pounding)

A Japanese Cultural Celebration

Mochi pounding is part of the traditional celebration of several important Japanese holidays and occasions. Among them, New Year's Day (**Kagami Biraki**), Girl's Day, Boy's Day, Birthdays, Grandparents Day, Emperor's Day, Athletic Day, religious holidays, and business openings.

In rural Japan, one can still see the traditional preparation of handmade mochi. The heavy wooden mallet and large log carved generations before to form a smooth bowl are set in place as the family, relatives and friends gather to begin the mochi pounding ceremony.

Mochi is a delicious high protein whole grain food made from sweet glutinous rice. The mochi rice is washed the night before and left in a tub of water to soak over night. Early the next morning the water is drained and the mochi rice is placed into a **seiro**, a wooden framed steam box, holding a bamboo mat. Three or four **seiro** are stacked onto each other and placed on top of a **kama**, a kettle with boiling water. In time, the bottom **seiro** is removed and the steam-cooked mochi rice is placed into the warmed **usu**, the wood stump mortar. A fresh **seiro** with mochi rice is placed on top of the stack, and this continues until the washed mochi rice has been all used.

The steam-cooked mochi rice that is placed in the warmed **usu** is then kneaded for a short time with the **kine**, the heavy wooden mallet, until the rice forms a single mass. Then the pounding begins. One person, sometimes more in turns, swings the **kine** in great arcs and pounds the rice with even force and enthusiasm. With the resonant strokes of the **kine**, another person darts his or her hand into the **usu** and turns the rice into position for the next pound. The turner and pounder work quickly and rhythmically until the individual grains of rice are no longer discerning, and the mass is smooth and shiny.

The large hot mass of mochi is lifted out of the **usu** and onto a table prepared with sprinkled **mochiko**, sweet rice flour. The mochi is also sprinkled with **mochiko** in order to make handling easier. One person pinches or cuts the mass into small golf ball size portions. Others form the golf ball size mochi into flattened round bun shapes with their hands. Finished mochi cakes are set aside to cool and dry, until ready to be eaten.

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