

おむすび（結ぶ） • おにぎり（握る）
OMUSUBI (musubu) • ONIGIRI (nigiru)

The Japanese often serve cooked rice at room temperature, packing it into *obentō* lunch boxes, or making it part of a buffet-like spread when feeding a large crowd. At such times, the cooked rice is likely to be hand pressed or shaped into a number of configurations, making it easier to portion out and hold when eating. Pressed rice is also easy to pack up and transport. The most basic shape is a triangle, though logs called *tawara*, or “rice sheath,” are also common. The pressed rice bundle is called either ONIGIRI or OMUSUBI (see note at end about [The Language of Food](#)).

Plain, white rice stuffed (like a sandwich) with a filling is the norm, but *mazé gohan* (cooked rice that has been tossed with other cooked foods) is also used in making pressed rice bundles. Usually wrapped with strips of *nori* (laver), sometimes the rice bundles are grilled and slathered with *miso* or brushed with soy sauce.



Shaping OMUSUBI/ONIGIRI Stuffed Rice
Basic recipe for 4 to 6 stuffed bundles with *nori* trim

4 cups cooked rice, still warm (or zapped in the microwave for about 20 seconds)

1/4 teaspoon salt

fillings:

beni-jaké furikaké (salmon flakes; separate recipe); 1 T for each *omusubi*

tsukudani kombu (kelp relish; separate recipe); 1/2 T for each *omusubi*

equipment: bowl of water to keep rice from sticking to your hands or molds

Sprinkle the salt over the rice and toss lightly with a *shamoji* (wooden paddle) or broad spatula to distribute. Use light, cutting and folding motions to avoid mashing the rice. Tossing the rice will also help to cool it so that you can handle it more comfortably.

Before shaping and stuffing the rice bundles, arrange your workspace:

- Have a bowl of cold water within easy reach.
- Divide your fillings into single portions (4 to 6 clusters of salmon flakes and/or kelp relish).
- Sub-divide your salted rice into 4 to 6 portions (using rice bowls or one cup measures is useful).

Measure, stuff and shape the rice using the **hand-pressed method**:

Dip your hands in water and shake off excess.

Scoop up a scant cup of salted rice and using both hands, lightly compact into a sphere. Transfer the rice sphere to your non-dominant hand and with the fingertips of your dominant hand press the center of the rice to make an indent. Place a single portion of one of the fillings in the indented space. As you do this, cup the palm of your non-dominant hand to bring the rice high enough to enclose the filling. If need be, add a teaspoon or so more salted rice on top of the filling.



Although hands make a fine tool for shaping *omusubi*, plastic, metal, and wooden molds in a variety of shapes and sizes are sold in many Asian grocery stores. Bowls and cups, lined in clear plastic wrap, can also be used to shape and mold rice.

Measure, stuff and shape the rice using a **measuring cup or rice bowl as a guide:**

Choose a cup or bowl that comfortably holds about 1 cup liquid. Most 1-cup measuring cups will work well (wide and squat is a better shape than deep and narrow); Japanese rice bowls (*ochawan*) can also be used. Have a bowl of water nearby (for dipping hands, cups, spoons and/or rice paddles in) and a damp cloth (for wiping rice-sticky hands).



Dip a one-cup measure in the bowl of water, shaking off excess moisture. Lightly fill the cup with salted rice less than halfway. Place a single portion of one of the fillings in the center; press lightly. Place a bit more salted rice on top of the filling so that it is no longer visible. Once the filling has been enclosed, you are ready to **shape the stuffed rice bundle**: Invert the cup (multigrain rice, above) to release. Or, use rice bowls lined with clear plastic wrap (salmon flakes, below).



Holding the rice bundle in one hand, bend your dampened fingers of the other hand to form a V-shaped “roof” over the top of the rice bundle. Exert gentle pressure with this top hand to mold the rice—this “roof” becomes one of the triangle’s pointed tips. Use the extended fingers of your bottom (non-dominant) hand to flatten the sides of the triangle.

With your cupped hand, roll the rice ball toward you, flexing your wrist to turn your hand up. As you do this, the rice ball will flip so that the edge that previously was formed against your top hand now rests on the flat palm of your bottom hand. Exert gentle pressure again to form the second pointed tip on top. Repeat the roll, press, and flip motion to complete the making of the triangle. As you work, group the rice bundles by filling to make it easier to identify later. Many home cooks will create their own system of identification according to the design of the *nori* band and/or the shape of the rice.





Finished *omusubi/onigiri* can be served on a platter (covered with clear plastic wrap if making ahead), or individually it packing into a picnic box (can be wrapped in clear plastic – the modern method – or dried bamboo leaves called *takénokawa*, the old-fashioned method. *Nori* can be added immediately (sticks easily to warm rice), or just before eating (a more distinct seashore aroma and slightly crispier texture).

If you like your *nori* wrappers to be crisp, cover each *omusubi* in clear plastic wrap until ready to eat them. When ready to serve, cut the *nori* lengthwise in four or six strips. Use one strip to wrap each *omusubi*. As you work, arrange the rice bundles by filling to make it easier to identify later. Many home cooks will create their own system of identification according to the design of the *nori* band and/or the shape of the rice (triangle, log, ball etc).

Salted, hand-pressed rice will keep well at cool room temperature for 5 to 6 hours; those stuffed with pickled plums will keep fresh up to 8 hours. If you need to store pressed rice for longer periods of time, wrap them individually in clear plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours, or freeze them for several weeks. Chilled or frozen *omusubi* are perfect for making *Yaki Omusubi*, grilled hand-pressed rice.



There is another type of sea vegetable that is used as a wrapper, especially tasty I think with a pickled-plum filling. Its made from vinegar-marinated kelp (*ma kombu*) and comes to market in two forms: *oboro kombu* and *tororo kombu*. Both are pale green, and gauze-thin. **OBORO KOMBU** (below, left) is made by shaving a single piece of vinegar-marinated *ma kombu*; the outer layers produce darker olive-green pieces while the center is almost white (the very core is called *shirata kombu* and is used to cover mackerel sushi). **TORORO KOMBU** is made by slicing across many pieces of vinegar-softened *ma kombu*; the resulting pieces are striated (and used as a garnish for many other foods... also as a quick soup when added to hot water).



The Language of Food

I am often asked what the difference is between *omusubi* and *onigiri*, the other word Japanese use to describe hand-pressed rice. Answer: none. *Musubu*, the origin of the word *omusubi*, means to “connect” or “bring together,” while *nigiru*, the root of the word *onigiri*, means to “compress or squeeze.” Both words are descriptive of the process of making these sandwich-like foods. Neither the generation, nor gender, nor geography of the speaker seems to affect the choice of word.

Since the word *nigiri* is often used to describe a style of sushi (nuggets of tartly seasoned rice typically covered with a slice of raw fish), I prefer not to use it when speaking of hand-pressed rice. For me, and about half the population of Japan, the word *omusubi* evokes homemade comfort food; its what mama used to make.

屯食 *tonjiki*, written with calligraphy for “gather” + “food,” are the prototype for modern day *onigiri*.

Several references to *tonjiki* appear in the 11th century novel *Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki Shikubu. In her tale of court romance and intrigue, *tonjiki* are described as “compact, egg-shaped spheres of cooked rice.” It seems they were prepared in the banquet kitchens not to be served to guests, but rather to feed the household help. The rice was mixed with millet and other less costly grains.