

Culture Notes - New Year お正月 Oshogatsu

Background Information

New Year in Japan is celebrated on January 1st. It is an important celebration and one where whole families gather together. Preparations for New Year begin long before the actual day and people display traditional decorations in their homes (see notes further on). On New Year's Eve, noodle dishes are eaten, again in the hope you will be blessed with a long life (because noodles are long).



New Year Decorations



Soba noodles, a common dish on New Year's Eve

At midnight, many families will go to their local shrine or temple to listen to the large temple bell being struck 108 times (to get rid of the 108 sins which are on earth). You can try a virtual temple bell: <http://www.jodo.or.jp/joya/>

Lucky charms may be bought from the shrines, such as an arrow, and this will bring good luck throughout the year. Last year's charms are then burned in a special bonfire at the temple or shrine to remove the threat of illness and bad luck.

Ema

People may also write an 'ema' or a wish board to wish for something good to occur during the coming months. These boards can be purchased at shrines and are displayed all together. The boards will often have a horse drawing on one side, dedicated to the gods or, at New Year, the animal for the coming year.



Osechi Ryori

On New Year's Day, special food called *osechi ryori* is eaten which contains many bean and fish dishes. It is prepared in advance, so no-one has to work on New Year's day. Osechi ryori is normally arranged in beautiful lacquer boxes and some of the food inside is symbolic as a wish for the family's health and prosperity over the coming year. Rice cakes in a special soup called ozoni is also a popular dish to eat over New Year.

Nengajo

New Year's cards, or nengajo are sent to family and friends, much in the same way you may send Christmas cards. All post office bought cards contain a unique number and there is a lottery held shortly after New Year with various prizes available. Post Office cards and many others are usually bought blank. It is a tradition for families to decorate and



print their own cards. These days you can buy cards with designs already on them, but they are less popular. The card design will usually contain a picture of the Chinese zodiac animal for the forthcoming year. All cards are collected by the post office and then all delivered at the same time on New Year's Day (even though it's a holiday).

Otoshidama

Children also receive money at New Year from their families. The gift is called otoshidama and is presented in ornate envelopes (often with a popular cartoon character on the front or the Chinese zodiac animal of the year to come). These envelopes are very popular with children and they can't wait to receive them!



New Year Decorations

Here is a list of some of the more common decorations you can expect to see in a Japanese house.

Kadomatsu



Perhaps the most symbolic of the New Year decorations, kadomatsu are usually set up on either or both sides of the front entrance of a house. They are generally comprised of pine boughs, 3 bamboo stalks and plum tree sprigs. The three bamboo poles are all a slightly different size and are cut diagonally. The pine and plum tree sprigs are set in the centre and the base of the decoration is tied together with straw ropes.

The decorations are left outside the home in an attempt to welcome long life, good fortune and prosperity into the household. Pine trees are traditionally associated with longevity, because they themselves tend to grow tall and strong and live a long time. Bamboo is thought of as a symbol of prosperity and flexibility with strength and plum trees, the first to flower in spring, are often linked to good fortune and strength through adversity.

Shimenawa

Shimenawa, or sacred straw ropes can be seen throughout the year at shrines. They are always hung before Shinto shrines and around places considered sacred. According to Shinto beliefs, evil cannot pass beyond a shimenawa line. Plaited from rice straw in a left-handed twist, which represents the positive aspect of nature and existence, most have decidedly larger ends which taper. The biggest end should be placed to the left side of the shrine or sacred spot.



A 'god shelf' in a family home, decorated for New Year

The origin of shimenawa dates to the time of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. It seems that family problems caused the Sun Goddess to hide in a deep cave. She was finally forced from her hiding place and to prevent her returning, Prince Futodama placed a rope across the entrance, called 'shirikunmi-no- nawa'. This term was later shortened to shimenawa.

Japanese people welcoming in the New Year make special types of shimenawa for their homes. Wanawa or circle ropes used at New Year are a modern interpretation of traditional shimenawa. They are often unadorned or perhaps hung with only a few simple paper decorations and strands of unplaited straw.

Daruma

Daruma dolls are another popular New Year's decoration. These dolls are rounded and vary in size. They are modelled on the 6th Century Buddhist priest called Bodhidharma who is said to have lost the use of his arms and legs after meditating for nine years. Nowadays it is customary to buy your new Daruma doll just before New Year. It is bought with no eyes, but the doll's left pupil should be coloured in after purchase and a wish made. If the wish comes true before the end of the year, then the other eye can be coloured in.



Daruma dolls being sold at a Daruma market.

In January, many towns hold 'Daruma Burning Ceremonies' and old Daruma are tossed into bonfires as a means of ridding yourself of last year's bad luck and illness.

Kagamimochi

Kagamimochi are edible decorations! They are usually made from two round rice cakes stacked on top of one another. The bottom cake is the larger of the two and a small orange is then usually placed on top. The whole decoration is then set on a stand called a sampo and is seen as an offering to the New Year Gods. It is displayed from New Year until January 11th, when it will be taken down and eaten. With more formal decorations, other good luck symbols such as kelp, dried persimmon and lobster are used to decorate the kagamimochi.



Visit the Japan Society New Year's Page for further lesson resources and activity ideas:
<https://www.japansociety.org.uk/resource?resource=11>