



Year of the Snake

	JAPAN
New Year's name	Oshogatsu
Date in 2013	January 1-3 Japan uses the Gregorian calendar, which is based on the Earth's orbit around the sun.
Examples of special foods and drink prepared for the New Year	Sake (rice wine), soba (noodles) for long life, beans for good health, fish roe for prosperity, ozoni (soup with mochi, which is pounded rice cake)



Bowls of ozoni photograph courtesy of Jamie Little

Journey with Newspapers In Education and Wing Luke Museum to learn how different Asian Americans celebrate the New Year!

Asian Americans bring with them many holidays from their ancestral homelands. One of the most important celebrations is the New Year.

Learn about Oshogatsu, the Japanese New Year, through the experiences of Midori Kono Thiel. Midori is a Japanese American, born in California and raised in Hawaii. She and her husband, Philip, a third generation German American, have lived in California and Japan before coming to live and work in Seattle.

NEW YEAR'S TRADITIONS

Even though she didn't grow up in Japan, Midori remembers performing "Yukiyama" (snow mountain), a special New Year dance about Mount Fuji, at a theater in Seattle's Japantown. Midori recalls the symbolism of the first performance of the year. "The beginning of the year is a time to encourage yourself to be better, no matter what discipline you follow. In Japan, it is the tradition for groups to gather for the first dance, music, martial arts, calligraphy brush painting — the first practice or performance of any art form — to encourage improvement and bring good luck into the new year."

As an alternative to a first performance of the year, many Japanese American organizations here host a New Year's dinner for Oshogatsu called Shin Nen Kai (or first gathering of the new year). Japanese Americans may also eat special foods for the new year — such as ozoni, a warm soup featuring pounded rice cake (mochi) that melts in your mouth. Midori notes that several organizations in the Seattle area still make mochi traditionally, pounding the rice with a large, blunt wooden mallet and a stone or wooden mortar.

Japanese Americans may also carry on traditions of cleaning their homes and themselves before the new year begins. Midori explains the origins of these practices. "Rooted in Shinto beliefs, the idea is that by cleaning or bathing, you purify yourself. You sweep out the old spirits and put up New Year's decorations of pine and bamboo to welcome the good energy. Also, in Japan, people used to make brand-new kimono (Japanese dress) as a symbol of a fresh start."

Midori has observed that current generations of Japanese Americans sometimes observe the New Year with a slight twist. "My nephew and his family participate in an annual New Year party that has gotten so big that they need to rent out the gym at our church. The four main families involved take turns doing all the planning, and then they bring all the food, set up the volleyball net or board games for the kids. Everyone has a good time," explains Midori.

BEING UNIQUELY AMERICAN

Midori initially moved to Japan to study woodblock printing, but her interest in Japanese culture was fueled even more by her exposure to Japanese masters and the encouragement of her husband, Philip. Today, Midori continues to practice Japanese dance and visual arts and has served as the artistic director for the Japanese Performing Art series for 20 years.

LOOKING AT YOUR OWN FAMILY TRADITIONS

Do any of your family traditions originate from another country? If so, be sure to learn the special meanings of words and observances that are a part of these traditions so you can keep them alive.



Midori Kono Thiel photograph courtesy of Midori. Photographer Kenji Thielstrom.



Pine decoration photograph courtesy of Charlene Mano Shen.

Celebrate New Year in the Chinatown-International District

Opening Celebration — Saturday, Feb. 2 (10 a.m.– 5 p.m.)
Wing Luke Museum (8th Avenue South and South King Street)
wingluke.org/2013newyear

11 a.m. Lion Dance
12–3 p.m. Zodiac scavenger hunt and stuffed animal petting zoo, New Year passport, games, crafts and prizes!

Celebrate the arrival of Year of the Snake with your students or private group. From interactive storytelling to cultural art activities, your group will experience many exciting New Year traditions. For more information, please contact the tour coordinator at 206.623.5124, ext. 133, or tours@wingluke.org.