

New Year Celebrations in US and Japan

The word *osechi* recently came up in the English language cross cultural communication class I teach at Temple University Japan Campus in Tokyo. The students were practicing ways to describe Japanese food to their international friends.

When I was asked a few days later to write about New Year celebrations in the US and Japan for 泉州ルネサンス, *osechi* is what came to mind first.

I had heard about the special New Year lunch boxes years ago but didn't know the Japanese word for them. And this is after more than fifteen years in Japan...

In fact, after so many years in Japan I only know bits and pieces of *oshogatsu* customs in Japan. I usually travel back to the US for Christmas and often have not returned by January 1. *I go back because I want to celebrate that holiday with family.* And I do know that *oshogatsu* is also an important time for family reunions in Japan.

I learned about *osechi* from an American friend whose husband is Japanese. When she told me years ago about these New Year lunch boxes I remember two conflicting reactions. One was that it sounded like a good way to save cooking time for the women! *But I wasn't so sure how good the food would taste.* I love the special Christmas dinner we have in my family even though preparing it does take a lot of effort.

This same friend also told me about the game *hanafuda* which she played with her in-laws during New Year holidays. It reminded me that on Christmas day in the afternoon after the presents have been opened and the dinner is cooking my family often plays games. I really love doing this and look forward to this every year. I have noticed lovely decorations on the doors in Japan during the days of *oshogatsu*. When I return to the US for Christmas there are wreaths on many doors in addition to all of the other Christmas decorations outside many homes.

Of course I know that going to the temple and ringing the bells is a spiritual part of New Year. And in the US my family, like many others, often attends Christmas Eve church services.

Students have told me about receiving money from parents and relatives during the New Year period. American children don't get anything special on New Year's Day, but just one week earlier on Christmas day they've often received piles of presents!

I only have a few personal experiences of New Year celebrations with Japanese friends. I have eaten soba noodles on New Year's Eve. And my former landlord invited me to eat "mochi" and "miso shiro" with him and his wife some of the years when I was back in Japan before the holiday period ended. *I remember that it was very tasty and that I was taken aback, but not completely surprised, to learn that every year some people actually choked to death on the mochi!* I also remember the warm and comfortable feeling of visiting during the relaxed holiday days after January 1.

One year I arrived in Narita early in the evening December 31 and rode the Airport Limousine bus through an almost deserted Tokyo. I thought then that if it had been Christmas Eve and I was riding a bus alone in a big city on Christmas Eve I would have felt very lonely. But as it was, it was rather fascinating to see the city so quiet. On the other hand, one year I did spend Christmas in Tokyo and it was very disorienting to see that it was a "normal day" here.

So maybe there are some common features between Christmas celebrations in the US and *oshogatsu* in Japan. And the reverse might be true too.

Christmas Eve in Japan seems to be a popular time for couples to do something special together. In the U.S. New Year's Eve is party time. And single people often want to have a "date" that night. Usually the parties are *with friends rather than family gatherings.* At midnight there are kisses and noisemakers and champagne toasts.

On January 1 many groups of family members or friends watch football games and annual parades on TV. It's a good day for snack foods. People make New Year resolutions ... which often involve losing weight! Membership in sports clubs usually go up in January! On January 2 the holiday season is *over.* The decorations come down children go back to school and the adults back to work. *But not much work gets done on January 3!*