

Kikkoman's quarterly intercultural forum for the exchange of ideas on food



## THE JAPANESE TABLE

# Annual Events and Traditions

## Winter: From Harvest to New Year

by Yoichiro Nakamura

*Our series featuring the traditional celebratory foods associated with Japan's old lunar calendar concludes with this final installment, where we follow harvest-related events, Shichi-Go-San rites of passage, the winter solstice and finally, the anticipation of another New Year.*

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# Annual Events and Traditions

## Winter: From Harvest to New Year



From left: Gohei-mochi; sekihan

### Harvest Festivals

Annual events and traditions in Japan are linked to the ancient cycle of growing rice. As autumn approaches, the rice blossoms, its ears laden with tiny white flowers—and it is just at this time that the Japanese archipelago faces typhoon season. Hoping to appease the wrath of the wind gods, a special hand-twisted rice straw *shimenawa* rope was often hung at village entrances to fend off destructive winds.

Once rice has been successfully harvested, thanksgiving rituals are held. Sheaves of freshly harvested rice are offered, and other bounty is prepared for rites honoring local guardian deities. To this day, the emperor himself makes offerings of newly harvested rice to the gods, partaking of new rice while praying on behalf of his people. This palace ritual is the *Niinamesai*, celebrated nowadays as Labor Thanksgiving Day on November 23. At well-known shrines with long histories, offerings presented to the gods during harvest festivals take the form of foods as they have been prepared traditionally. For example, at Tanzan-Jinja Shrine in Nara Prefecture, copious offerings called *hyakumi no*

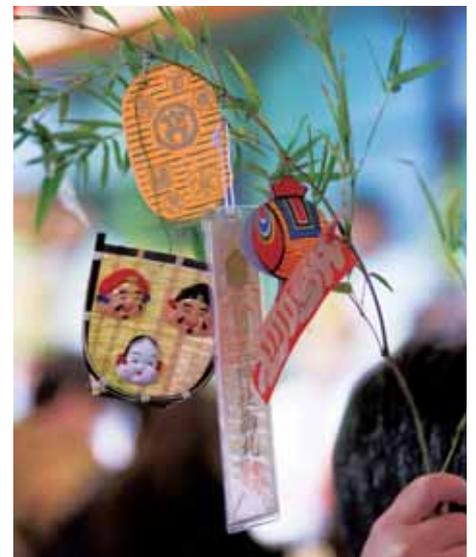
*onjiki*, or “one hundred foods,” are presented. Similar offerings are made at other shrines throughout Japan.

The tenth month of the lunar calendar marks the beginning of winter. The custom observed on the “Day of the Boar” of this month is to prepare *botamochi* rice ball sweets of steamed non-glutinous and glutinous rice that are coated with a layer of auspicious adzuki bean paste. These are placed in a lacquered box and shared among neighbors, a custom that reaffirms community bonds.

### Ebisu Festival

The twentieth day of the tenth lunar month celebrates Ebisu, deity of good fortune, whose image is traditionally placed on a shelf in a corner within the home. Ebisu is considered the patron of fishing and bountiful harvests, but in urban areas, the god assures prosperity in business. Special offerings might include grilled *tai* sea bream and vegetables, including daikon radish. As the family gathers to share the celebration, sometimes lots are drawn to choose which offerings each person receives. Shrines dedicated to Ebisu are found throughout the country,

and festoons of tree branches are traditionally sold at festivals held during the tenth or first lunar month. These are hung with auspicious decorations that symbolize prosperity and happiness, such as oval-shaped gold coins and *tai*. This is also the season for freshly harvested daikon. The vegetable is an essential ingredient in many family meals, appearing in simmered dishes and vinegar salads, and as pickles. During this season, rituals are held for purification against ill-fortune and to express thanks for the harvest. At shrines, worshippers



Tree branch decorated with an imitation gold coin and other decorations



From left: *Chitose-ame* in a colorful bag; foods piled high on bowls are presented as *hyakumi no onjiki* offerings at Tanzan-Jinja Shrine.

are sprinkled with water shaken from bunches of broadleaf bamboo dipped in a cauldron of hot water, in a purification ceremony called *yudate*. In mountainous parts of central Japan, *yudate* involves rhythmic dances dedicated to the gods. A traditional food prepared for these rituals is *gohei-mochi*, skewered cakes of pounded rice basted with miso and grilled.

### Shichi-Go-San

November 15 is set aside for celebrating the healthy growth of children who have reached the ages of seven (*shichi*), five (*go*) and three (*san*). The children are dressed formally, often in traditional Japanese attire, and presented at a nearby shrine where prayers are made for their health and happiness. The young celebrants are presented with traditional stick candy called *chitose-ame*, “long-life candy,” and served *sekihan*, made with glutinous rice steamed with adzuki beans. This rice is served on such special occasions because of its auspicious red color. The *chitose-ame* is made of a gelatinous barley syrup that is kneaded and hardened. It carries specific significance, as Japanese legends tell of how this

symp, given in place of mother’s milk, saved the lives of orphaned infants, thus earning its reputation as being essential to children’s health and well-being. Another tradition observed late in the year honors tools that have become worn out during the year. One such example is *hari-kuyo*, a ritual honoring hard-working sewing needles that have become broken or damaged. The spirits of needles used for stitching fabrics are “appeased” on this day by passing them through soft tofu or pliable *konnyaku* konjac. Another winter tradition, celebrated mostly in Kyoto, is *daiko-daki*, where temples dish out servings of daikon that has been simmered in a large pot, to help people avoid catching cold.

### Winter Solstice

*Toji* is the winter solstice, the day in the year when the sun’s presence in the sky ebbs to its lowest; it is also the day when the power of the sun is “reborn,” and a time when notable traditional events are held around the world. In the Japanese home, *toji* is marked by making simmered *kabocha* squash and adzuki beans, foods believed to prevent illness. Fragrant fresh

*yuzu* are placed in the bath, to ward off disease. Even as the old year winds down, preparations for the New Year begin. The Izu peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture is renowned for its bonito, and at this time the fish are cleaned, salted and hung in the wind to make salted bonito for use as offerings. This careful planning of foods for the New Year takes place in other parts of the country as well, and some regions associate salmon or yellowtail with this special time.

As the year and its traditional observances come to a conclusion, we look forward with anticipation as the cycle begins once again with a New Year promising fortune and prosperity. ◆

#### cover

Simmered *kabocha* squash and adzuki beans

#### Author’s profile

Yoichiro Nakamura, Ph.D.; born in 1943. A specialist in historical and folklore resources, Prof. Nakamura was formerly professor at Shizuoka Sangyo University (SSU), and is currently guest researcher at the SSU Institute of Research and Development. His major works include: *Iruka to nihonjin* (“Dolphins and Japanese,” 2017); *Myanmar: Ima, ichiban shiritai kuni* (“Myanmar: the country we’re most curious about,” 2013); *Bancha to shomin kissashi* (“Bancha tea and the history of popular tea drinking,” 2015); and *Washoku bunka booklet 2: nenchu gyoji to shikitari* (“Washoku culture booklet, no. 2: annual events and traditions,” 2016).



## CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends  
in Japanese food culture



From left: *Osechi ryori* composed of Chinese dishes and of traditional Japanese cuisine

# Contemporary *Osechi Ryori*

During the first three days of the New Year, Japanese enjoy *osechi ryori*, an elaborate array of preserved foods presented in gorgeous, multi-layered lacquered boxes. The origins of *osechi ryori* arose from offerings made to honor the gods during *sekku*, special days which mark the changing of the seasons throughout the year. The most important of these is the welcoming of the New Year, and today's *osechi ryori* developed from this custom.

*Osechi ryori* includes only auspicious foods, whether in color, name or shape; for example, *kazunoko* (herring roe marinated with soy sauce-based dashi) symbolizes the blessings of fertility and prosperity; the Japanese word *mame* in *kuromame* (simmered black soybeans with sugar) suggests working

*Osechi is an integral component of Japanese New Year*

energetically. Despite changing times, the ancient custom of *osechi ryori* remains an integral and significant component of Japanese New Year traditions—albeit in simpler, rather more user-friendly versions.

In the past, *osechi* dishes were prepared days in advance by the women of the household. Because these foods were intended to last through the first few days of the New Year, they were often preserved, pickled or salted, and were heavily seasoned. Nowadays, refrigeration,

working couples and busy schedules have upended the conventional *osechi* scene, and the number of those preparing these special foods is gradually declining. Fortunately, buying prepared *osechi ryori* is now acceptable.

*Osechi ryori* is sold in various forms and is available from single helpings to large family-size quantities. Healthier, preservative-free versions are offered as well, including low-sodium and gluten-free options. *Osechi* may be pre-ordered and purchased at department stores, convenience stores and restaurants, or even online. Not only is it convenient to source *osechi*, but consumers may select from a surprising range of cuisines, from traditional Japanese favorites to Chinese or Western fusion. ●



## Tai Sea Bream

The sea bream or *tai* is a popular fish among Japanese. Its white flesh has a unique umami, and whether served simmered, grilled or as sashimi, it has an ideal firmness. The vermilion color of the *tai* is auspicious in Japanese culture, and this, as well as its graceful form, is why the fish has come to represent good fortune. The ancient image of Ebisu, one of the Seven Gods of Fortune, is represented as carrying a plump *tai*. Its name is phonetically similar to *medetai*, which evokes a sense of good wishes, and so the fish is typically served on

celebratory occasions. *Tai* imagery appears in the form of *kamaboko* steamed fish cakes at weddings, and as *tai*-shaped *kinkato* sugar confection during the Doll Festival in March. Dishes bearing *tai* designs are also used for special festivities. During the first three days of the New Year, a whole grilled *tai* is traditionally offered to the god of the incoming year; on the fourth day, the fish is eaten—and is then referred to as *niramidai*, which means it must first be looked upon as an offering before being consumed. ◆



Grilled *tai*



*Tai*-shaped *kinkato* confection

### TASTY TRAVEL



*Kozuyu*

## Fukushima *Kozuyu*

*Kozuyu* is a regional dish from Aizu, in Fukushima Prefecture. The dashi broth of this clear soup is made of dried scallop, and its ingredients include dried shiitake and cloud-ear mushrooms, carrots, *satoimo* taro, *ito-konnyaku* (konjac noodles) and wheat-gluten croutons (*mamefu*), seasoned with soy sauce and mirin. Situated inland, Aizu historically had limited access to fresh seafood, and so dried ingredients were used to prepare *kozuyu*, with the dried scallop itself prized above the other ingredients. *Kozuyu* is traditionally served in special Aizu lacquered bowls during the New Year and other celebrations. Normally, asking for several refills is frowned upon during auspicious occasions—but *kozuyu* is the tasty exception. ◆



## COD YUKI-MI NABE “SNOW-VIEWING” HOT POT WITH COD

*Hakusai* napa cabbage and dashi are ingredients used in traditional Japanese *nabe* hot pot; here, Western-style cabbage is substituted for *hakusai*. If preferred, chicken or sliced pork may be used rather than cod. The name *yuki-mi nabe* refers to the impression of viewing “snow” (*yuki*), as evoked by white grated daikon.



◆ Daikon

### Serves 2

189 kcal Protein 27.6 g Fat 2.1 g  
(per person)

- 3 cod fillets, total 250 g / 8-9 oz.
- 1/2 t salt
- 1 t sake
- Total 800 ml / 3 1/3 C dashi + bouillon\*
- 1 T sake
- 1 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce
- 1/4 cabbage, 200 g / 7 oz., chopped
- 1/4 block of soft tofu, 100 g / 3 oz.
- 2 shiitake mushrooms, stems removed
- *Seri* (Japanese parsley); or watercress or Italian parsley
- 250-300 g / 1 C grated daikon, slightly drained
- 1 knob fresh ginger, peeled and grated\*\*
- Kikkoman Soy Sauce or ponzu sauce, to taste\*\*\*

- 1 Sprinkle the cod fillets with 1/2 t salt and set aside for 10 minutes, then rinse and wipe with a paper towel. Drizzle the fillets with sake and cut each into thirds.
- 2 Parboil the cod until the outer surface of the fish turns white; drain.
- 3 In a pot, heat the dashi-bouillon stock, sake and light color soy sauce.
- 4 Add the cabbage and cover. Simmer over low-medium heat until cabbage is nearly cooked.
- 5 Cut the tofu into 2.5 cm squares, 1.5 cm thick (1 in. squares, 3/5 in. thick). Add the tofu, shiitake mushrooms and cod to the pot. Cook slowly over low-medium heat.
- 6 Add *seri*, grated daikon and grated ginger. Turn off the heat just after coming to a boil, then serve.

\* Instead of mixed stock, either dashi or bouillon may be used alone.

\*\* Fresh ginger reduces the unique aroma of grated daikon; if ginger is unavailable, the cooking liquid can be flavored with bay leaf, kaffir lime leaf or lemongrass.

\*\*\* As diners serve themselves from the hot pot, they can season their portions to taste with either soy sauce or ponzu sauce.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T = 15 ml; 1 t = 5 ml



## KATSUO NO TATSUTA AGE DEEP-FRIED BONITO

*Tatsuta age* recipes typically involve fish or chicken marinated in a soy sauce-based sauce; the meat is then coated with cornstarch and deep-fried. This marinade not only acts as a seasoning, it mellows the strong flavor of the meat. Tuna, chicken or lamb may be substituted for bonito in this recipe.



鰯

◆ Katsuo fillet

### Serves 4

170 kcal Protein 19.7 g Fat 7.7 g  
(per person)

- 300 g / 10 oz. fresh *katsuo* bonito fillet
- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 20 g / 0.7 oz. ginger, grated
- 8 *shishito* green peppers\*
- Vegetable oil for deep-frying
- 2 T cornstarch

- 1 Remove the skin from the bonito and cut the fish into bite sizes, about 1 cm / ½ in. thick.
- 2 Mix soy sauce and grated ginger in a bowl. Add bonito and allow to marinate for 15 minutes.
- 3 Prick each *shishito* green pepper with a toothpick to make 2 or 3 small holes (*see photo*), which will prevent the oil from splattering. Cut off stems.
- 4 Heat oil for frying to 170 °C / 335 °F. Add the peppers gently and deep-fry briefly until they turn a bright green. Remove and place them on a paper towel to drain.
- 5 Coat the bonito with cornstarch and shake off excess.
- 6 Increase the oil temperature to 180 °C / 355 °F. Deep-fry the bonito in oil until the fish turns golden brown and rises up from the bottom of the pot. Remove and place the fish on a paper towel to drain.
- 7 Serve the deep-fried bonito on a platter with the *shishito* peppers.



\* Sweet mini peppers may be substituted. If these are unavailable, 4 small green bell peppers may be used; cut and remove seeds before deep-frying.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



## KFE Celebrates 20 Years in the Netherlands



Left (from l-r): Mr. Willem van Gogh, Advisor and Ambassador, Van Gogh Museum; Mr. Yuzaburo Mogi, Honorary CEO and Chairman, Kikkoman Corporation; Mr. Adriaan Dönszelmann, Managing Director, Van Gogh Museum; Mr. Osamu Mogi, Director, Executive Corporate Officer, International Operations Division, Kikkoman Corporation. Right: Mr. Mogi with Professor Pieter van Vollenhoven of the Royal House of the Netherlands, Chairman of the Victim Support Fund.

Kikkoman Foods Europe B.V. (KFE), located in Hoogezand-Sappemeer in the Netherlands, is Kikkoman's soy sauce production plant in Europe. It celebrated its 20th anniversary in November 2017. To commemorate this event, KFE held a ceremony in The Hague on November 8, which was well-attended by many honored guests.

Kikkoman has continued its dedication to awareness activities such as recipe development and cooking demonstrations so that consumers in Europe, with different

food cultures, customs and trends in each country, may use soy sauce not only as a seasoning for Japanese food but in their local cuisines as well. With the establishment of KFE as a production and logistics base, the Netherlands plays an essential role in the distribution of our products throughout Europe. The volume of shipments from KFE has increased more than seven-fold since it was first established.

Since KFE was founded, Kikkoman has made various social contributions by donating to environmental, artistic and educational initiatives in the Netherlands, as well as to cross-cultural studies between Europe and Asia.

Following news in early 2017 that two van Gogh paintings, stolen in 2002, had been recovered, Kikkoman donated to the restoration being conducted on the works to return them to public viewing in the Netherlands. The company also

plans to continue its sponsorship of the Rembrandt House until 2022, as well as to support an ongoing, long-term water-quality improvement project for a lake near KFE. Kikkoman is also participating in charities affiliated with the Royal House of the Netherlands, contributing to its Victim Support Fund, as well as to children's water and energy conservation awareness activities.

These multifaceted social contributions reflect one of Kikkoman's management principles "to become a company whose existence is meaningful to the global society." Growing together with each of the communities in which we operate is one of the goals of the Kikkoman Group. As a good corporate citizen, we will continue "the international exchange of food culture" through our contributions in diverse areas such as the environment and culture. ●



Kikkoman Foods Europe B.V. (KFE)