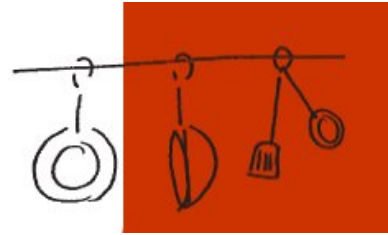




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O-Shogatsu: An Auspicious New Year's Feast By Ellen Bhang

We all love auspicious beginnings. O-Shogatsu, the Japanese New Year, provides the perfect occasion to wish family and friends longevity, good health, and prosperity. What better way to ring in the New Year than with the traditional foods known as osechi ryori? Read on to learn the background and significance of soul-satisfying ozoni, sweet-savory tatsukuri, and glistening kuromame...

The New Year is the most important holiday in Japan. While once celebrated according to the lunar calendar, it is now celebrated on January 1st. Like other cultures' New Year celebrations, it is a time to settle accounts, clear up lingering disputes, and thoroughly clean house. The foods of O-Shogatsu, however, are distinctively Japanese.

In anticipation of neighbors and relatives stopping by on New Year's Day, these traditional foods are prepared in advance and served at room temperature. This gets the cook out of the kitchen and allows mingling with guests. Of course, that means much preparation in the days prior. Yet the effort is well worth it. For generations, this elaborate spread was a way for the woman of the home to show off her culinary skills and flair for hospitality. For Japanese Americans today, preparation of the traditional New Year's feast remains an enduring thread to past.

Traditionally, the different foods are apportioned into stackable lacquered boxes that nest into one unit called the juubako. Today, the visitor to a Japanese American home will find the dishes laid out buffet style, the table groaning under the weight of the colorful platters.

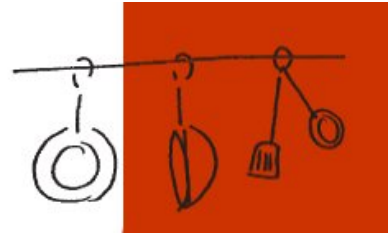
Osechi Ryori Described

So what are these wonderful foods and what do they mean? Here is a primer of what you will encounter.

OZONI – This clear broth with mochi signifies long life and health for the whole year. Mochi, made of pounded glutinous rice, is formed into balls and steamed. Mochi has a chewy texture that provides a meditative mouthful. Stewed briefly in a clear dashi broth, the mochi softens. Mustard greens or spinach, as well as morsels of chicken or kamaboko fish cake, round out this warm and satisfying soup.



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KUROMAME – These glossy black beans are prepared to be sweet with a savory undertone. They cook up to the size of pinto beans. “Mame” means to be healthy and are eaten for good luck. Some elders encourage eating one bean for each year of your life. The older folks will certainly tell you that beans are a great source of vitamins and protein.

KOMBU MAKI – Kombu is a substantial variety of seaweed that is one of the most important flavors in Japanese cuisine. It is the basis for dashi broth. Kombu sounds like the Japanese word for happiness, so it is especially important to eat these little bundles of joy at the beginning of the year. Kombu is often wrapped around dried anchovies and cooked in broth.

TATSUKURI – These are tiny dried anchovies that are brushed with a savory-sweet preparation and toasted until crisp. They have a delicious toothsome crunch and are eaten eyes and all. It is no wonder that they carry the meaning of wholeness. Many Japanese children will be heard to exclaim at New Year’s that their food is staring at them!

KIMPIRA GOBO – Don’t be put off by the appearance of gobo. Also known as burdock root, it looks like a big brown stick. Yet julienned and stir fried with sweet carrots, it is an earthy dish that signifies strength and stability. The Japanese were the first to cultivate it as a vegetable. It is known for its healthy medicinal properties.

NISHIME – These dashi-simmered vegetables represent the bounty of the field and forest. Renkon, or lotus root, is sure to please with its distinctive holes reminiscent of swiss cheese. Konnyaku, or yam cakes, are often scored then turned into decorative twists. Sato imo, or Japanese taro, is pleasingly slippery when cooked. Shiitake mushrooms, with their meaty profile, round out the nishime platter.

SUSHI – No O-Shogatsu feast would be complete without sushi. The generous rolls of nori-wrapped futomaki are common to this celebration, as are inari, seasoned sushi rice in golden tofu pouches. Traditionally, the presence of seafood on the table represented the bounty of the sea. For many Japanese Americans, sushi at New Year’s brings back fond memories of grandmothers who lovingly prepared their futomaki and inari for this special feast.

O-Shogatsu Class at Uwajimaya Bellevue

You can learn how to prepare osechi ryori for the New Year or for a healthful addition to any meal. NuCulinary chef Naomi Kakiuchi will demonstrate all of the steps in an annual class in December. And be sure to pick up or order online [“The Art of Sushi”](#) DVDs to round out your O-Shogatsu celebration. The class and the DVDs are sure to give you the tools to make an auspicious New Year’s feast.