

Lucky Foods and Rituals for New Years

Most holidays have food connected to them, whether it is over-consumption, consumption of a specific item or fasting, but New Years takes it up a step with a plethora of food consuming rituals around the globe. But with all of the variation and symbolism, the intent is very consistent; a year of health, wealth and happiness.

Many good luck creating foods are round or ring-shaped to signify that the old year has been completed or the year going full cycle.

Italian tradition draws on the shape of the lentils resemble the old tiny lira coins, and fatty sausage represents a nice, fat wallet. Parsley decorates the dish because it was thought to ward off evil spirits. Eating lentils is part of the ritual in Brazil as well. In Italy you might also be served *Chiacchiere*, or honey drenched balls of fried dough, to ensure a sweet year.

Greeks bake *vassilopita*, a cake with a coin in it. The person who gets the slice with the silver or gold coin is considered very lucky! Italians eat sweet *panetonne*, Mexicans enjoy the ring-shaped *rosca de reyes* cake, and the Dutch indulge in puffed, doughnut-like *ollie bollen*. Of course a bagel is another ring shaped food.

In Turkey and other Mediterranean countries, pomegranates are said to represent good luck and abundance. Their bright red color is thought to denote life and fertility. The Greeks smash one in front of the door – the more seeds the more luck.

In Bosnia and Croatia minced beef is rolled inside large cabbage leaves to make *sarma*, said to bring health and wealth.

In Spain and Portugal you eat 12 grapes or raisins, one by one, at the stroke of midnight to bring good luck for all twelve months of the coming year!

Austrians, Swedes, and Germans frequently choose pork or ham for their New Year's meal. In Europe hundreds of years ago, wild boars were caught in the forests and killed on the first day of the year. Pork is a reoccurring menu item as a pig uses its snout to "root forward", which represents progress. Pigs are also associated with plumpness and getting plenty to eat.

Germans and Swedes may pick cabbage as a lucky side dish. Some Germans and Poles choose herring. Another source says Germans eat carp.

The Japanese serve *Toshikoshi* (this means "sending out the old year.") *soba* (buckwheat) noodles on New Year's Eve. Their long shape symbolizes (and hopefully bring with it) a long, healthy life. Those who can swallow at least one of them without chewing or breaking it are supposed to enjoy good luck and a long life. As similar belief emerges in Chinese rituals.

Another tradition in Japan is to eat *mochi* (pounded rice), topped with a bitter orange called *daidai*. The orange makes the dish doubly lucky because "*daidai*" also means "several

generations." Similar to *mochi*, Korean eat *ddeok* in *ddeokguk*, rice-cake soup, at sunrise. It is believed to add one full year to your life.

In the early twentieth century Japanese-Americans adopted the tradition of serving glutinous rice dishes, soups, boiled lobsters (signifying health and happiness), and fish specially prepared to appear live and swimming.

The Chinese probably have the most extensive traditions. In ancient times, during the New Year's period, palace dignitaries were presented with purses embroidered with eight Buddhist symbols called "Eight Treasures," which they proudly hung on their chests. Eight is a traditionally a lucky number. In more recent times this is evoked by serving of a fruit-filled rice pudding called Eight Treasures rice pudding. Alternatively, some house might put out a tray for visitors to snack on. The eight compartments of the tray are filled with things such as preserved kumquats for prosperity, coconut for togetherness, lichees and longans to bring many sons, red melon seeds for happiness, steamed rice cakes and jujubes (red for luck), and salted seeds.

Chinese will also display and eat tangerines and oranges for wealth and luck. The tradition stems from the way the Chinese words for *gold* and *orange* sound alike, while the word for *tangerine* echoes *luck*. It's good if they have leaves because leaves symbolize longevity. But don't group them in fours, because this number is associated with death.

Jai, the Cantonese name for a vegetarian stew, is eaten as part of the Buddhist tradition to cleanse oneself with vegetables. It's also packed with good-luck foods, including: sea moss for prosperity; lotus seeds for children/birth of sons; noodles for longevity; lily buds to "send 100 years of harmonious union"; Chinese black mushrooms to "fulfill wishes from east to west", and more. It also takes several hours to prepare.

Chinese traditions continue with long beans and long leafy greens, such as Chinese broccoli, that are served whole to wish a long life for parents.

The Chinese word for *fish* sounds like the word for *abundance*, so fish is served. It's important that the fish is served with the head and tail intact to ensure a good start and finish and to avoid bad luck throughout the year."

Chinese eat foods wrapped in lettuce during the Chinese New Year because the word for lettuce is similar to the word for "rising fortune." In North China, *jiaozi* dumplings are common. These are made by wrapping dough around pork and cabbage, and boil it, then serve them with vinegar and soy sauce. You can wrap them in the shape of an old silver ingot. At New Year *jiaozi* are called *yuanbao*, a reference to the ancient, ingot-shaped Chinese currency. Eating them is said to bring prosperity. While making them, people sometimes tuck added good-luck foods like peanuts (to bring long life) into some of them. During the festive dinner itself, red sweet-and-sour sauce is sure to be part of at least one dish, be it pork or fish. This is also the time to give the "Kitchen God" some sticky sweets so he won't give a bad report on the family."

Serving sweet desserts brings a sweet life in the New Year. A specific Chinese New Year's sweet is *Nian gao* means *year cake*, but *gao* sounds the same as the word for *tall* or *high*, hence the

cakes symbolize achieving new heights in the coming year. The steamed sweets are made of glutinous rice flour, brown sugar, and oil. Some versions have white sesame seeds, red dates, or nuts in them (the dates are said to bring “early prosperity,”) Eating New Years Cake was a practice the Dutch brought to New Amsterdam (NYC) but the tradition seem to be fading.

In Vietnam a special rice pudding called *banh Chung* or *banh Tet* prepared beforehand. The pudding contains mung beans and pork. Other delicacies on the New Years table in Vietnam include preserved sweets, chicken, fish, oranges, beef, grapefruits, coconuts and some seasonal fruits. Watermelon is considered the most auspicious fruit of the season as its flesh is red. Its dried seeds are also used for various delicacies.

New Englanders often combine their pork with sauerkraut to guarantee luck and prosperity for the coming year.

In the southern USA they start the year with black eyed peas and collard greens; the beans are meant to represent coins, and the rich green collards are the color of money. The black-eyed peas can also be part of a dish called “Hoppin' John”, which can includes rice (which swells in the cooking), red, green and yellow bell peppers, celery, tomato, onion, garlic, meat bone and spices . The children in the family might even hop around the table before the family sits down to eat this lucky dish.

Bolivians and some people in New Orleans eat turkey. Other people claim that eating fowl (such as turkey, goose, or chicken) on New Year's Day will result in bad luck. The reason: Fowl scratch backward as they search for their food, and who wants to have to "scratch for a living"?

The special dish in Peru is *papas a la huanchaina*, a potato dish tinted with turmeric or with a saffron-colored spiced called *tadillo*. It is believed that eating gold-colored food will put money in your pocket.

Cuban tradition is to roast a suckling pig. [The also throw a bucket of water out the window for cleansing at midnight, so be careful walking down the sidewalk at that time.]

Eating fish is said to be lucky in three ways: their scales resemble coins, they travel in schools, which represent prosperity, and they swim forward, symbolizing progress. People in the Northwestern US may eat salmon for good fortue, but salmon doesn't have scales or school. Salmon is has long had a special place and is auspicious for the First Nation people of the region.

Sources:

Friends, family and life experiences

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