

Happy New Year — again!

OUT WITH THE EVIL! IN WITH THE GOOD!

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What is the best way to prepare for the lunar new year in Japan? Why not throw roasted soybeans at your relatives? One caveat: this only works on February third. And keep in mind they are not really your relatives when you are pelting them. They will have donned *oni* (Japanese for “demon”) masks to represent evil spirits. In addition, you must chant “*Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!*” while you are throwing the beans. This means, roughly, “The demons are without! Good fortune is within!” and will purify you and your home. To seal the deal, gather up and eat the same number of beans as there have been years to your life plus one.

This is one of the uniquely Japanese customs that has found its way across cultures and through time, having been altered at many turns along the way, that inspires curiosity even in natives of the archipelago. The day is called *Setsubun* and that name is as good a place as any to start unraveling the mystery.

The word consists of two kanji characters, *setsu* and *bun*, both of which refer to division. *Setsu* specifically indicates a division of time. The term has its origin in the Chinese lunar calendar that was adopted by the Japanese in ancient times. Because lunar months are determined by the phases of the moon (making them shorter than the months in the Gregorian calendar that is used throughout the world today) the lunar year needs a lot of tweaking to keep it in synch with the seasons. To do this the calendar makers also kept track of the annual cycle of the sun’s angle to the Earth, dividing it into 24 seasonal sections. In Japan, the last day of each of these periods was called *setsubun*.

Ancient astronomers, astrologers, and timekeepers may have viewed these divisions dispassionately, but for most people the *setsubun* that marked the end of winter (the last two periods were named, ‘Moderate Cold’ and ‘Severe Cold,’ and the following one, ‘Spring Begins’) was clearly a time for celebration. Through the centuries it has become the only one that is commonly remembered and the general term has become its specific name.

In both Chinese and Japanese philosophy the change of seasons is when the border between the spirit world and our own becomes thinner, and it is easier to cross over it in either direction. So *Setsubun* makes an ideal time to exorcize demons and send their evil influence along with them. The rituals called *tsuina*, designed to chase away evil spirits, were also adopted by the Japanese



from Chinese culture. They are still performed at *Setsubun* today.

The throwing of beans began during the Muromachi period of Japanese history (between the 15th and 16th centuries). There is a suspicious similarity between this practice and the plot of an old Noh drama. In the play, an old woman is visited by a mysterious stranger who carries a magic mallet. With the mallet, he proceeds to make an exceptionally beautiful kimono. Desiring both, the woman gets the man drunk until he realizes what she is up to and reveals himself in his true form as a demon. In her panic the woman reaches for the nearest weapon to defend herself — a handful of dried beans — and is able to drive off the ogre. In this way she loses the things she coveted, but also loses the evil emotion of greed and gains the purity of wisdom.

Another tradition, which has survived from the Edo period (the 17th to the 19th centuries), predominantly in western Japan, shows the relationship between the Chinese lore of geomancy and their measurement of time. Each year in the lunar calendar is associated with an auspicious compass direction. The custom is to face in that direction and eat an entire role of *makizushi* (sushi rice rolled in nori seaweed). Some say it must be done in silence, others



recommend laughter, to bring good fortune. It has been suggested that the tradition began when an Osaka geisha performed the ritual to ensure she would be with her lover of choice during the coming year. Why she would chose this particular delicacy to cast her romantic spell can be left to the imagination, but more generally rice and seaweed are natural gifts from the land and the ocean. Eating them in such a favorable time and orientation may purify us from the inside out.

There are a number of ways to join in the festivities. You are sure to find Setsubun sets, comprising a handful of beans (or round candies for those with a sweet tooth) and an oni mask, in most supermarkets and convenience stores at this time of year. Sushi shops are, of course, well stocked with uncut makizushi. Some include a chart to point you in the right direction for the year.

Most temples hold some kind of celebration on the third of February. Many of them invite celebrities to throw beans and other small prizes to the crowds that gather there. Sometimes the beans are wrapped in gold or silver foil, and peanuts may also be thrown.

In some shrines, such as Nagata Jinja in Kobe, the celebrations include performers dressed as oni who dance with torches. In Nagata Jinja, this culminates in the appearance of a

mochi-splitting oni, who tries to split apart two large mochi cakes representing the sun and moon, but is driven away by the crowd. In other temples the oni are defeated by a *Bishamonten*, a powerful and benevolent spiritual figure.

Among the more unusual celebrations is the one at Kinpusenji Temple in Nara prefecture. As at other temples, oni are defeated here, but the traditional chant is altered to, *Fuku wa uchi, oni mo uchi!* ("Fortune is within, and the demons are welcome!") in order to round up the demons who are being expelled all over the nation.

Nara's Kasuga Taisha shrine holds an evening festival, beginning around 6pm in which 3,000 lanterns, standing or hanging in the forest, some as much as 800 years old, are lit. The only other time these lanterns are lit is in August.

Osaka Aquarium is featuring diving oni who clean the tanks every day up until Setsubun. It is only on this day that Osaka's Senkouji temple allows you to make the famous Shikoku pilgrimage of 88 temples in a matter of minutes by providing cushions filled with sand from each of the temples for you to walk over.

At Heian Shrine in Kyoto a variety of rituals are performed throughout the afternoon that date back centuries and combine geomancy, archery, and exorcism to usher in a good year. They also serve *amazake*, a very sweet, low alcohol sake, piping hot, all day long.

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KINPUSENI TEMPLE

Nara-shi, Yoshino-gun,
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www.kinpusen.or.jp

KASUGA TAISHA SHRINE

Nara-shi, Kasugano-cho 160
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OSAKA AQUARIUM

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SENKOJI (TEMPLE)

Osaka-shi, Hirano-ku,
Hirano-Honmachi 4-12-21
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KYOTO HEIAN JINGU

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