A Taste of Japan

The 3 ‘R’s to good eating – Restaurants, Reviews & Recipes

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Golden kumquat dish symbol of money, good fortune

Now that we've taken care of the happiness portion of the New Year food courses with burdock, it's time to summon money with kumquats!

In Japan, this tiny citrus fruit is called kinkan and forms part of the Osechi Ryori because the name in kanji is either “金柑” or “黄金”，which means “gold tangerine” and “gold crown” respectively. In China, where the fruit originated, its name is “金桔” (jin jié), meaning “wealth” and “good luck”, according to the Japan Weather Association.

Besides the prospect of monetary wealth, kumquats are delicious and delicately sweet! They can be eaten raw but for the New Year, we have it in kanroni, which stews kumquat with sugar and mirin sweet cooking rice wine. The cooking process brings up a distinct sweetness and fruitiness with a marmalade-like jelly. Refrigerated in a jar or airtight container, the kanroni will last long like burdock grows.

Commonly called kinkan-no-kanroni, stewed kinkan is a regular menu item for the New Year's meal. Try the recipe below, adapted from the Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union. With just a few simple steps to follow, this would arguably be one of the easiest Japanese New Year foods that you can make on your own.

The only daunting part of the entire recipe is removing the seeds. However, for 30 pieces of kinkan, I was able to complete this task in 10 minutes by making small slits on the delicate skin and using a toothpick to pry out the seeds with a little patience.

From start to finish, it took me about 90 minutes. Though it is a bit longer than I usually spend on cooking, the end result was totally worth it. The heavenly scent of the kinkan, sugar and mirin will entice you to give it a little taste, but just be careful not to burn yourself.

Another good point to know is that this can be cooked in a big batch and stored much like you would marmalade or jelly. Refrigerated in a jar or airtight container, the kanroni will last about six months to a year.

So, add this sweet dish to your New Year’s lineup and see if it brings you good luck and wealth in 2022!

Kinkan-no-kanroni (stewed kumquat)

INGREDIENTS
- Kinkan (kumquat) 30 pieces
- Water 450cc
- Sugar 135cc
- Mirin (sweet cooking rice wine) 22.5cc

RECIPE
1. Rinse and wash off kinkan with water.
2. Put kinkan in a deep pot with water and place over high heat. (Make sure there’s enough water to cover the kinkan. Stop heating just before the water is boiled.)
3. Drain water and take kinkan out of the pan.
4. Let them cool.
5. Once cool enough to hold, remove the seeds. Do this by making about six vertical slits on each kinkan with a kitchen knife and using a toothpick to bring the seeds up and out. Be sure to remove stem ends as well.
6. Heat 450cc of water, 135cc of sugar, 22.5cc of Mirin (sweet cooking rice wine) in a deep pan on a medium-high heat for a few minutes.
7. Add kinkan to the mixture and slowly heat it on a medium heat, until the tangerine starts to glister and soften.
8. Serve on small plates cold (you can also enjoy this dish warm if you let it cool a little after cooking). Bon appetit and good luck in the New Year!
New Year’s is Japan’s biggest and longest holiday. People take Dec. 29 through Jan. 3 off from work to celebrate the first three days of the year praying at temples and shrines for the coming year. It is our Christmas and Thanksgiving—a time to relax with family and friends over special foods and sake.

When I was a child, every year my family would go to my grandfather’s house in the Oita countryside to celebrate New Year’s with relatives. It was an important time of year when we enjoyed a traditional New Year’s feast around the “kotatsu,” a low table with a heater underneath to keep us warm and cozy.

There are traditional Japanese foods to ring in the new year that are as pleasing to the eye as they are the palate. I can’t say that I liked them all as a child. But these days, I find that their traditional meanings as well as the childhood memories they bring back make this a feast that I look forward to all year long.

You could say that, traditionally, the feast really begins on New Year’s Eve, or “Omisoka.” On this day, it is customary for Japanese to clean house to bring good fortune in the coming year. (OK, this part is not a fond memory; I always wanted to play with my friends while my mom made me clean my room.) Then we eat “toshikoshi,” or passing-year, soba noodles at night.

According to tradition, we eat long thin noodles in hopes of a long healthy life for the whole family in the coming year. Some people eat homemade soba or, on Okinawa, Okinawan soba; others eat a cup of instant soba noodles. It does not matter, as long as it is soba noodles.

If you are lucky enough to be in Okinawa for New Year’s, you’ll find elements of two culinary traditions to sample. Because of its Ryukyu Kingdom history, Japan’s southernmost islands have their own indigenous dishes as well as those from mainland Japan.

“In Okinawa, families gathered to celebrate New Year’s with special foods that were served at ceremonies and feast year round, not just foods for New Year,” says Yayoi Kohagura, of the Okinawa prefectural government. “But ever since Okinawa was returned to Japan (in 1972), New Year’s foods have caught on. Nowadays, many people eat Okinawan and Japanese foods for New Year’s.”

Local dishes you should be on the lookout for in restaurants include “rafaute” (pork belly), “tsamu” (taro) and “inamuruchi” (white miso soup with chopped pork). While at the same time, stores across the island will have traditional Japanese New Year’s fare on offer.

The first quarter or half of January is commonly called “oshogatsu.” It refers to the whole month of January as well. Plus, the first three days of the month are called “sanganichi.” During those days, “ozoni” and “osechi” are the main dishes on a typical Japanese family’s table. Ozoni is a clear soup that contains “mochi,” a glutinous rice cake; fish cake; chicken; leafy greens; carrots; shiitake mushrooms; and maybe more.

The soup stock varies from region to region. In most of mainland Japan it may be flavored with seaweed or “bonito” (dried fish flakes). People make mochi so that ozoni in western regions like Kansai. In Okinawa, instead of ozoni, people eat “nakamijiru,” a soup made with chitterlings.

From ancient times, mochi has been a celebratory food in Japan representing fortune. Today, you can still see it at traditional events and elsewhere in the form of white, stacked, circular cakes (or packaged squares at grocers) — especially this time of year. You’ll also see a lot of mochi pounding events where large mallets are used to pound steamed rice into mochi. Although mochi is not a traditional ingredient in nakamijiru, nowadays it may be added to this Okinawan dish just like ozoni. It’s tasty but be careful.

“There have been cases when people, especially the elderly and small children, have severely choked on this densely chewy treat. So watch out when you eat mochi for the first time. But once you try really good ozoni, you will be obsessed with the awesome taste. This is, by far, my favorite New Year’s dish. Then there is osechi, which literally means beginning a new season and represents the start of the new year. This is a set of selected dishes. It’s kind of like a fancy bento box for the entire family that is eaten during sanganichi, sometimes for all three meals.”

They are designed to nourish and wish the family well, while expressing thanks for the new year. The foods are beautifully arranged in a “jubako,” which is traditional lacquered food box with three or four tiers. Osechi consists of foods that can be prepared in advance and keep for a few days without spoiling. Traditionally, it ensured everyone got a three-day break, even mothers and wives who wouldn’t have to cook and wash dishes. Also, most stores and restaurants used to be closed during oshogatsu.

These days, some stores open Jan. 1 because business can be good. It is believed that osechi started during the Edo Period (1603-1867) when coming up with a variety prepared foods that would keep for three days was a pretty amazing feat.

For those who don’t have a lot of time or desire to prepare osechi, you can order them from companies at supermarkets and online. You can even order one at

Osechi is a decorative set of dishes eaten on New Year’s. Each traditional Japanese dish has a special meaning, expressing well-wishing for the coming year. These osechi can be found at department stores or supermarkets. Here are some of the classic dishes.

Kazunoko (herring roe) are tiny yellow fish eggs. The many eggs signify prosperity for your descendants. The texture is chunky and the eggs are not loose. They are marinated in a broth of bonito soup stock, sake and soy sauce. You can often find them at sushi restaurants. Kuromame (sweet simmered black beans) is soft and sweet. You may also notice a bit of soy sauce flavoring. Kurumame represents good health and diligent work. Tazukuri are small sardines that have been dried and cooked in a sweet sauce. The texture is soft and sweet. Tazukuri represents good health and diligent work. More osechi dishes

Get to know your ‘osechi’ dishes

Klawk
the nearest convenience store and pick it up. There is a wide variety available, including traditional Japanese as well as Chinese, Western and even Disney-themed osechi. Prices range is from the equivalent of about $150 to $200 for a three- to four-person osechi.

“This traditional Japanese food was recognized on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2013,” says Fumitoshi Kumagai, a spokesperson for osechi maker Kibun Foods Inc. “Since then people have been paying more attention to traditional osechi. So they are quite popular this year. But character-themed osechi such as Disney are also popular with families who have small children.”

It’s too bad they didn’t have those fancy kiddy osechi when I was growing up. Honestly, I was not a big fan of osechi as a child because a lot of the traditional foods were kind of bland vegetable dishes and I would have preferred something like steak or fried chicken. I was also not too thrilled about eating the same food for a couple days. But times, and I, have change.

Now I really enjoy and appreciate osechi. It comes from the wisdom of my ancestors. The colors and designs of each dish are works of art with meanings intended to bring good fortune in the coming new year. I guess my sense of taste has grown – grown for a taste of Okinawa.

Osechi’ dishes

- Kombumaki or Kobumaki is kelp roll and stuffed with salmon or chicken, which has been cooked in a sweet soy sauce-based sauce. The name of kobumaki is a play on words, which means joy in Japanese, so it’s eaten for good luck food during New Year’s.

- Aiyu juice. These are rich in calcium. Ayu repre-
sents praying for a large catch and a good harvest. Don’t be afraid to eat the head!

- Kusukuro is kelp roll and stuffed with salmon or chicken, which has been cooked in a sweet soy sauce-based sauce. The name of kusukuro is a play on words, which means joy in Japanese, so it’s eaten for good luck food during New Year’s.

- Tazukuri Kuromame (sweet simmered black beans)

- Aiyu juice

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- Tazukuri

- Kusukuro

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There are many theories surrounding how or why the noodles became a part of the year-end ritual. According to the Nihon Menruigyo Dantai Rengokai, an association of noodle makers in Japan, the most common theory involves the belief that the thin and long shape of soba noodles represents the hope for longevity and good luck.

Other theories include the breaking of bad cycles of struggle, misfortune, and debt because soba noodles are easy to cut. Or, another is that the noodles could bring good fortune because soba noodles are easy to cut.

There are many theories surrounding the origin of soba noodles. Some of the theories you subscribe to, or another is that the noodles could bring prosperity because soba noodles are easy to cut.

No matter what kind of luck it brings or which of the theories you subscribe to, soba noodles are a quintessential part of the New Year celebrations in Japan and well worth a try.

On the subtropical island, Okinawa soba noodles, made from flour not buckwheat, are what you’ll find at local restaurants. Although there are some eateries dedicated to the Japanese-style buckwheat soba noodles, finding those spots is a bit of a challenge. But many family restaurants on Okinawa have Japanese-style soba noodles on their menu, so check those out. Or, better yet, you can cook your own at home!

Try this simple recipe and have fun choosing the toppings to make it your own. This was my first time trying to cook Japanese-style soba noodles, but it turned out great. The soy-sauce based broth and the smooth texture of the noodles went well together. The shrimp tempura and shichimi togarashi (seven-spice chili pepper) I used as toppings added a nice punch of flavor.

My soba noodles and broth were so good, I am now wondering whether I should go with Japanese-style or my usual Okinawa-style soba noodles for Dec. 31. This will be a difficult choice, but either way, I am on track for eating a lot of soba noodles to bring luck for 2022.

Recipe

**Preparation**

1. Peel the shell off shrimp except for the closest portion to the tail. Devein the shrimp. Sift the tip of the tail diagonally and squeeze out water.
2. Sift the stomach of the shrimp a few times and bend backward and straighten them by stretching the silted portion. Wipe water off the shrimp and sprinkle salt and flour on them.
3. Chop naganegi (shallot) finely and drain the slices.

**Cooking Instructions**

1. Mix beaten egg and cold water in a bowl. Add flour and mix them together to prepare tempura batter.
2. Heat salad oil in a pan to 160 ℃ (320 °F). Holding the shrimp’s tail, dip into the batter, then transfer to heated oil. (Make sure its tail is not soaked in the batter.)
3. Sprinkle additional batter on top of the shrimp and fry for about 3 minutes. Take it out and drain excess oil.
4. To prepare a broth, put water (600cc), soy sauce (45cc), mirin (sweet cooking rice wine, 30cc), dashi (stock powder, a little more than 5cc), and salt (for broth, 1.25cc) in a pan, strain out the water.
5. In a separate pot, bring water in a bowl. Add flour and mix them together to prepare tempura batter.
6. Portion out your noodles into a bowl and pour the broth over.
7. Top with shrimp tempura and other toppings to your preference.

*For two people

**INGREDIENTS**

- Shrimp (x 2)
- Salt (a little)
- Soft flour (for tempura batter, 100cc)
- Naganegi (shallot, 4cm or 1.57 inches)
- Soba noodles (240g)
- Water (600cc)
- Soy sauce (45cc)
- Mirin (sweet cooking rice wine, 30cc)
- Dashi (stock powder, a little more than 5cc)
- Salt (for broth, 1.25cc)
- Salad oil (for frying tempura, appropriate amount)

*Recipe adapted from Ajinomoto (https://park.ajinomoto.co.jp/recipe/card/705786/), a major food company in Japan.

Wrapped up year with soba said to bring longevity

Shichimi Togarashi

“Shichimi” literally means “seven flavor chili pepper.” This mixed spice consists of red chili pepper and six other ingredients.

- Red Chili Pepper
- Black Sesame Seeds
- White Sesame Seeds
- Dried Ginger
- Nori seaweed
- Perilla Seeds
- Hemp Seed

You can make the taste better by sprinkling this on soba noodles. Shichimi is available in grocery stores.
It tastes as good as it sounds

Beginning with an Eric Clapton guitar, Hard Rock Cafe owns the world’s greatest collection of music memorabilia, which is displayed at its locations around the globe. For fans of music, great food and good times, Hard Rock is the go-to restaurant to get that authentic American diner-inspired cuisine wrapped in a unique musical experience. So, it’s time to strike up the band! Events, like great music, are born to inspire others. At Hard Rock Cafe, we pride ourselves on delivering an exceptional experience with a rock ‘n’ roll twist for each and every one of our guests.

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