New Year's O-sechi Cuisine: Wishing for Happiness in the Year Ahead

Photo: Gyojishoku Association

An example of how o-sechi is served.

O-sechi, enjoyed at home, is the most common and traditional New Year's cuisine in modern Japan. We spoke with an expert on o-sechi to learn about its origins. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

O-sechi cuisine is typically prepared using ingredients that can be preserved, with a variety of colorful dishes carefully arranged in a *jubako* box[1]. These dishes are designed to last so those who usually prepare meals can rest during the New Year. We spoke with KOMIYA Rimi, an expert on o-sechi cuisine and the representative director of the general incorporated association, Gyojishoku Association, to learn more.

"When explaining o-sechi to people overseas, I describe it as a representative dish of Japan's special or extraordinary days. It is a celebratory meal that the Japanese enjoy on the first day of the New Year. Originally, o-sechi referred to food offerings made to the gods during one of the five seasonal festivals (*sechinichi*[2]) that occur throughout the year. Over time,

Photo: Adobe Stock

An example of o-sechi cuisine, beautifully arranged in a lacquered *jubako* box[1]. The three-tiered circular vessel on the left is a lacquered sake cup.

Photos: Gyojishoku Association

Above: *Kazunoko* (herring roe).
Below: *Tazukuri* (sweetly simmered dried sardines).

Above: *Kuro-mame* (Sweetly simmered black beans).
Below: *Tataki gobo* (burdock root seasoned with sesame).

however, the New Year's festival came to be regarded as the most special of these occasions, and the term 'o-sechi' itself eventually came to mean the food prepared for the New Year and New Year's Day," explains KOMIYA.

The origins of o-sechi, where dishes are arranged in a *jubako* box as seen today, are debated, but it is believed to have begun around the 14th century. However, lacquered *jubako* boxes were considered luxury items at the time and were not widely accessible. It is thought that the practice of using them became more common around the 17th century.

The ingredients and dishes used in o-sechi each carry special meanings. KOMIYA explains as follows: "The seasoning, presentation, and the shape of the *jubako* box can vary by region, giving each a unique style. However, dishes such as *kazunoko* (herring roe)[3], *tazukuri* (sweetly simmered dried sardines)[4], *kuro-mame* (sweetly simmered black beans)[5], and *tataki gobo* (pounded burdock root)[6] are commonly eaten throughout Japan. In fact, each ingredient carries a wish: *kazunoko* represents prosperity for descendants, *tazukuri* symbolizes a good harvest, *kuro-mame* signifies health, and *tataki gobo* stands for stability. All of these reflect hopes that family members and loved ones will have a happy and prosperous year. In addition to o-sechi, *zoni* (soup with mochi rice cakes) is also an important dish."

Zoni originated from the custom of cooking and eating the mochi and offerings that were presented to the gods during seasonal rituals. It is a dish that symbolizes receiving the blessings of the gods while wishing for a good year ahead, making it an essential part of New Year's cuisine.

"O-sechi is not only notable for its vibrant appearance but also for being a prime example of Japan's longstanding culture that values the meaning behind the dishes. Overseas visitors often express admiration for this, recognizing it as a dish Japan can be proud of, including its cultural significance. Moving forward, I hope to pass down Japan's traditional food culture that is tailored to the seasons and events, including o-sechi, to future generations," says KOMIYA.

Photo: Gyojishoku Association

An example of *zoni* eaten in Kyoto City and other areas. It features white miso-based soup with round mochi, vegetables such as Kyoto carrots, taro, and daikon radish, topped with bonito flakes[7].

1. A box-shaped container with a lid used for packing food. Traditionally, it is an elegant container made of black or vermilion lacquerware, often adorned with lacquer decoration (*maki-e*). The use of such containers symbolizes the wish for the accumulation of celebratory occasions, and they are commonly used on special days. *Maki-e* is a technique where patterns are drawn with lacquer on the surface of the container, and then gold or silver powder is sprinkled on top to adhere to the design.
2. Celebratory days held at the changing of the seasons are known as 'sekku.' There are five specific days: January 7, March 3, May 5, July 7, and September 9, collectively referred to as the 'go-sekku.' These events were established to pray for a safe and prosperous passage into the future, giving rise to various traditional rituals.
3. Salted herring roe. It symbolizes the wish for prosperity for descendants.
4. Dried young sardines that are roasted and coated in a sweet and savory sauce made with soy sauce and sugar. Since sardines were used as fertilizer for rice fields, it symbolizes a bountiful harvest.
5. Sweetly simmered black beans. The word 'mame,' which means 'beans,' is a homophone for another word that means 'strong' and 'healthy,' symbolizing health and the ability to work hard.
6. Burdock root, pounded to soften and make it easier to eat, then simmered. Since burdock grows deep roots in the earth, it symbolizes stability.
7. The bright red, slender Kyoto carrot is a vegetable beloved in Kyoto. Taro is a plant native to Southeast Asia, with the edible part being the enlarged underground stem. Additionally, the daikon used in Kyoto-style *zoni* is typically smaller in size.

Photo: Shitsurai Sanzen

An example of New Year decorations based on the concept of *shitsurai* in a Japanese home's *tokonoma*.[1]

The Significance and Spirit of *Shitsurai* in Japan's New Year

Japan has a rich tradition of seasonal events passed down through generations. The practice of beautifying indoor spaces during these occasions is known as *shitsurai*. We spoke with YAMAMOTO Michiko, a leading expert in the study and practice of *shitsurai*, to learn more about these New Year decorations in Japan. **(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)**

In Japan, seasonal events are observed throughout the year, such as New Year celebrations in January, Doll Festival (or Girls' Day)[2] in March, and Boys' Festival (or Tango no Sekku)[3] in May. According to YAMAMOTO, the Japanese have traditionally valued the practice of *shitsurai*, which involves arranging and beautifying indoor spaces for such occasions. "New Year's is a traditional event held on January 1, where families welcome Toshigami-sama (New Year's deity, see page 6 for reference) into their homes and offer sake and festive dishes. To greet Toshigami-sama with a refreshed and clear mind for the new year, *shitsurai* involves preparing the home and decorating with items such as *kadomatsu*[4]."

In Japan, traditionally, around December 13, people begin their major housecleaning[5] in preparation for the New Year. December 29 is a day off for rest, and on December 30, decorations are put up, which is the usual custom. Each of these dates carries its own significance.

"December 29 is avoided for New Year preparations because the pronunciation of '29' in Japanese includes the sound 'ku,' which is associated with the word 'kurushimu' (meaning suffering or hardship). It is customary to finish decorating for the New Year by December 30. Decorating on December 31, the day before New Year's Day, is considered too close to the arrival of the gods, which may lack sincerity and is seen as unfavorable. Specific examples of *shitsurai* include *kadomatsu* (New Year pine decorations) and *kagami mochi* (mirror-shaped rice cakes).

Photo: Shitsurai Sanzen

YAMAMOTO Michiko, a *shitsurai* researcher and the head of Shitsurai Sanzen.

Photo: Shitsurai Sanzen

An example of New Year decorations as part of *shitsurai*. The pine behind the mirror-shaped mochi (rice cakes) symbolizes a wish for longevity, and each decoration carries its own meaning.

Kadomatsu consists of two pine trees placed at the entrance or on either side of the gate, with traditional decorations made of straw[6] hanging from them. The word 'matsu' (pine) shares the same pronunciation as 'matsu' (to wait), symbolizing the anticipation of Toshigami-sama's visit. Also, because pine is an evergreen tree, it is often used in New Year decorations as a symbol of longevity and eternal life," says YAMAMOTO.

"*Kagami mochi*[7] are displayed in the *tokonoma* or entrance (see photo). The shape of *kagami mochi* is modeled after ancient mirrors, which were considered sacred in Japan as they were believed to house the gods. So, *kagami mochi* symbolizes the welcoming of Toshigami-sama for the New Year and is offered as a tribute to the gods. Stacking two mochi cakes represents the ideas of 'increasing fortune' and 'growing gracefully with the passing years,' while also symbolizing the balance of yin and yang, as well as the sun and moon."

In addition to *kagami mochi*, it is also considered good to decorate with special flowers or fruits to add a festive touch to New Year's decorations.

"For example, decorating with large citrus fruits[8] is a lovely tradition, as they symbolize a wish for good luck, linked to the Japanese term 'daikichi,' which means 'great fortune.' The red and white sprouting radish (see photo) also carries meaning, as it plays on the word 'omedeto-gozaimasu,' which means both 'congratulations' and 'sprouting,' symbolizing new beginnings and growth. Seasonal plants such as willow, pine, camellia, nandina, narcissus, lilies, and chrysanthemums are also used to celebrate the New Year and are considered symbols of good fortune."

YAMAMOTO says that when visitors from overseas have the opportunity to experience *shitsurai* in Japan, she hopes they will take a moment to reflect on the meaning behind each decoration and understand the spirit and intention behind it. "By tidying up the room, cleaning, watering the garden, and cleansing impurities, we prepare to welcome the New Year with a clear mind, alongside the gods. This practice has nurtured the Japanese spirit. *Shitsurai* carries the hope that the coming year will be a good one, a tradition that has been passed down through generations."

Photo: Shitsurai Sanzen

A *tokonoma* decorated with *kagami mochi* and a radish sprouting.

Photo: Shitsurai Sanzen

An example of decorating with a large citrus fruit called *buntan* (Left in photo). The larger the fruit, the more it is believed to symbolize 'daikichi' (great fortune). On the right is a decorative kite with a *shishi-gashira* mask design (see page 18).

1. In Japanese architecture, a *tokonoma* is an alcove raised slightly higher than the rest of the room, where items such as hanging scrolls, ornaments, and flowers are displayed. It was developed during the medieval period with the evolution of *shoin-zukuri* (traditional style of Japanese residential architecture) and became an important feature of room decor in the early modern period.
2. A Japanese tradition celebrated on March 3 to wish for the happiness and healthy growth of girls. It is also known as 'Hina Matsuri' (Doll Festival) or the 'Peach Festival,' during which dolls are displayed and special foods are enjoyed.
3. *Tango no Sekku* (Boys' Festival, Boy's Day or Children's Day) on May 5 is a tradition to celebrate the birth of boys and pray for their healthy growth. It is customary to display dolls, armor, and carp-shaped streamers.
4. *Kadomatsu* is displayed at the gate or entrance as a marker to welcome the gods into the home for the New Year. It typically uses pine, bamboo, and sometimes plum, symbolizing prosperity and longevity for the coming year. *Kadomatsu* is often placed in pairs, with bamboo at the center, and the height and cutting style of the bamboo hold specific meanings.
5. Cleaning the dust and dirt from indoor spaces, *kamidana* (shrine), *butsudan* (Buddhist altar), and other areas to purify them. It also signifies purifying the home to welcome the gods.
6. Rice or wheat stalks that are harvested and dried.
7. Food made by steaming glutinous rice and then pounding it until it becomes sticky. The resulting mochi is divided into large and small pieces, rounded, and stacked to create the decorative mirror-shaped mochi known as *kagami mochi*.
8. Fruits like *buntan* and *banpeiyu* (types of pomelo), as well as *oniyuzu* (Japanese citron), are commonly used for decoration. All of these fruits are known for their large size.